Rescues

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Rescues

by drinkbloodlikewine, whiskeyandspite

Summary

Mischa is living with PTSD, and Hannibal seeks out a service animal to help her. He meets Will, trainer of therapy dogs - cue puppies, adorable interactions and lots of dogs. And smut. Of course.

Notes

Written for warpedchyld asked for a story where Mischa had some kind of disability, and when Hannibal went to find her a service animal he met Will. Cue puppies, adorable interactions and lots of dogs. And smut. Of course.

We decided to give Mischa PTSD from *something* that happened to her and Hannibal's parents when she was 5. Up to your imagination what. Because of this, Hannibal has had to be made a hellofa lot younger, in order to have a young sibling, so he is 25 in this, still in Johns Hopkins.

We had a heck of a lot of fun with this piece, love, we hope you enjoy reading it just as much.

This series has timestamps!

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

> "A lot of our animals are rescues," Bev explains. “Much of the time they need a companion as much as they themselves are needed."
>
> There is another silence, in which Hannibal once more contemplates the pros and cons of this decision - Mischa's welfare versus a harder work schedule for himself. It is never an argument, never competition. He does hope, however, for both their sakes, that Mischa chooses a cat.

Sometimes it happens in the very early morning.

First a shuffle, then another, and then a scream.

It’s always the scream that makes Hannibal freeze - he’s usually out of his room by the time he hears the first sounds of waking, but the scream stops him dead. It is harrowing, too high to fit Mischa’s speaking voice, she sounds younger.

It takes a few moments before he can move again, and by that point she’s awake, scrabbling at the sheets and sobbing his name, and he’s there.

Sometimes it happens late at night.

Sometimes not at all.

Hannibal has studied enough on the mind to understand what’s happening, but far from enough to be able to help her. He had chosen surgery, in the end, not psychology, though he had kept the other as an open option for later study. For the moment, it is a viable option, something he finds interesting, something his parents would be proud he was spending his inheritance on.

He jerks awake, now, pen tapping a quick flamenco against the table on reflex, his mind wasn’t there. The lecture is slow today, and nearly empty. An early 8am start to a long day, and Mischa had woken twice the night before.

Beside him, another student sits buried fully in the screen of their cellphone, two rows below, another. And Hannibal has to wonder at the new generation of doctors that Johns Hopkins is setting free into the world in a few years.

His pocket vibrates with a message and he ignores it, determined to pay attention or slip back into his mind - it would be unfathomably rude to join the ranks of the mediocre around him.

But moments later, another. And then another. Then a call, and Hannibal grits his teeth before slipping out of his seat and making his way to the door.

Unknown number. Pity.

“Hannibal Lecter.”

"Hannibal," comes the chipper voice from the other end of the line. "This is Beverly. Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Astute enough to notice the silence on his end, the hushed tone of his voice as he emerges out into the hallway.

"You are," he responds, his tone more terse than he means it to be. Hannibal presses his fingers to the bridge of his nose and sighs, eyes close. "How can I help you, ah - Beverly?"

"Beverly, Bev - either works," the woman answers. "Beverly Katz. Katz and Dogs? The rescue center. You called us and left a message about -"

Hannibal drops his hand, shoving forward off the wall against which he'd settled. "Excuse me for being short, Miss Katz," he interjects gently, eyes rolling skyward in an unseen moment of regret - sleepless nights breed improprietous behavior, and this call was hard enough to get without Hannibal himself getting in the way. "I called about - "

"Your sister."

"Yes."

"Mischa. Am I pronouncing that correctly?"

"Mischa, yes," Hannibal agrees. "Close enough."

There is a pause of faint amusement, and Bev continues. "Before you get too excited, there are a few things we'll need to discuss - "

"Of course," he responds. "Anything."

" - specifically what a comfort animal - we like the word companion - what a companion is able to provide and not provide. Expectations are often very high that this will be an instant fix," Bev warns gently, snapping her fingers on the other end of the line to emphasize her point.

"The mind is never an easy fix, Miss Katz, no matter how much we may wish it was."

A laugh, gentle, on the other end, and Hannibal finds his shoulders relaxing a little. He's exhausted, he is wrung dry. In truth the call could not have come at a better time.

"Ain't that the truth." Hannibal can hear her smile. A pause and she turns some pages, perhaps seeking through the form Hannibal had filled out on her site the night before.

"We would need Mischa to come in to choose her companion," she continues, "obviously the two need to be compatible if the animal is to have a positive effect. You listed that you had no preferences for her between felines or canines, have you changed your mind at all?"

"Whomever she chooses," Hannibal responds, eyes down to regard his shoes. There is a scuff on the side of the left that makes him frown - he doesn't remember how it got there.

"You understand that beyond the compatibility we'll have to run a thorough check on you both to be sure the animal is going into a safe environment where it will not be mistreated?"

Hannibal blinks a moment, looks up.

"A necessary precaution. By all means, Miss Katz."

"A lot of our animals are rescues," she explains. “Much of the time they need a companion as much as they themselves are needed."

There is another silence, in which Hannibal once more contemplates the pros and cons of this decision - Mischa's welfare versus a harder work schedule for himself. It is never an argument, never competition. He does hope, however, for both their sakes, that Mischa chooses a cat.

"Then it is all the more important for both companions to be happy," Hannibal responds, and Bev agrees with a small sound.

"And the nature of your sister's need for a companion - you wrote down a lot of things."

"There were many things to write," he agrees.

"Verified by an attending physician? We'll need that for the state, and for insurance."

"Yes," he responds. "By many."

"Been making the rounds, huh?"

"Unfortunately," Hannibal murmurs. "There is little to be done, but one of the more competent psychiatrists that we've visited has said that others in her state have had success with this. And it is a noninvasive therapy, beyond my needing to accommodate for," he pauses, sighing, "shedding."

Bev sighs, sympathy in the sound, entirely too familiar with the gamut of tests and referrals given in these cases, equally familiar with how unhelpful they all end up being.

"It's a condition that's getting more and more research now, but disorders of the mind - especially those that require this level of sensitivity - they're tricky," she confers. "We've set up companions for others who are in that place, a few soldiers in particular, victims of trauma, and we've seen better success with this than with most of the medical treatments prescribed. It requires therapy - time - rather than medication. But -"

"I will temper my expectations," Hannibal says gently. "And hope for the best."

"That's the best any of us can do," she agrees. "I'll set up a time then, and you both can come in. Meet some of the animals - meet our trainer, who is," a pause, pensive, "familiar with this condition, in particular. And at the very least, it's a nice day out to meet some friendly cats and dogs."

There's a grin in her voice, and Hannibal catches his own lips curving into a faint smile, despite his doubt, despite his exhaustion.

"We look forward to it," he says, and a time is set.

Despite her fear, her exhaustion on some days, the weeks she has missed of school due to appointments and mandatory rest, Mischa is a good student. Grades well above average for her age, three languages under her belt at the tender age of eleven. She spends as much time researching her condition as her brother does trying to heal it.

Some nights she wakes quiet, presses the pillow between her teeth to ease the sounds down to her chest once more. Some nights it's necessary so Hannibal can get some sleep - necessary for her peace of mind that he does.

Yet beyond all that, the prospect of choosing a companion animal, when Hannibal had once claimed his distaste of such things as fur all over their home, brings out her true middle school nature: fidgeting in the car, fidgeting by the door, racing across the road - on the green light, of course - to fidget outside the center as she waits for Hannibal to catch up.

The rescue is spacious, a storefront downtown in the District, near enough to parks and pathways, Hannibal can surmise, without being overly sheltering from the noise of the city. An array of pet supplies - plush beds and fine foods and brightly colored toys - fill the front half of the store, a useful supplement to help keep the rescue afloat.

A bell jingles as he opens the door, and then Mischa is gone, in amongst the pet supplies she finds just as exciting as the prospect of seeing the animals themselves.

"Hey," comes a voice from amongst the shelves, its owner appearing with a blink. Shaggy curls of hair, clean-shaven, eyes bright blue and shy, avoiding meeting Hannibal's own, behind glasses that perch too low on his nose, the man ruches up the sleeves of his flannel shirt and finishes wiping his hand on a towel before offering it out to Hannibal. "Something I can help you find?"

"My sister," he offers, tone soft and just barely lined with amusement. The man smiles, takes his hand back to run through his hair when it's released, and turns towards the distinctive sound of an excited child in his store.

"I shall do my utmost," he promises, making a quiet sound with his tongue before turning back. "Bev said someone was coming in today to have a look. I'm Will."

There is the sound of nails clicking on lino and a warm orange *something* brushes past Hannibal's leg to sit beside the other man - Will.

"That is Winston.” A pleased bark at the sound of his name, from the dog, and the inevitable sound of rushing feet as -

"Your sister. Found, as promised."

Hannibal blinks, genuinely charmed despite himself, as Will watches Mischa carefully approach Winston and hold out her hand for him to sniff.

"Hannibal Lecter," Hannibal finally manages, catching himself before the pause grows pregnant, before he's rude. "And Mischa."

A slight smile is offered, curious, but not allowed to linger overlong before Will turns to Mischa and extends his hand in just the same way - no crouching, no patronizing tone.

"Mischa, very nice to meet you," Will says, with another little smile. "I'm Will. I see you've already met Winston."

She blinks and, pleased to be treated just like her big brother, shakes Will's hand politely, and releases it to turn back to the fluffy dog now nosing at her for attention. "It's nice to meet you," she recites, with a glance towards Hannibal for approval, and then turns her entire attention back towards Winston. "Hannibal says you have a lot of dogs. Can I see them?"

Will ducks his head, smile widening into a crooked grin, as he nods. "We have a few, yes. And cats, too. I'm sure they'd all like to meet you."

He glances towards the back of the shop, and tilts his head in that direction. "Come on back - you can meet them, and Beverly." The last intended for Hannibal, with another quick glance before Will lets Mischa lead the way.

A door separates the rest of the shop from the rescue in the back, a small office and two large rooms. Both are half-carpeted, shelves and climbing platforms built in for the cats, quiet nooks and big play spaces for the dogs.

"They come home with us or fosters on the weekends, or some nights. They live with us while we're still working with them," Will explains. "There are volunteers who help us, I can run you through the whole training regimen if you'd like."

Hannibal tilts his head in a gesture emulating a shake of his head. He can see the animals are given proper attention and care, the way Winston follows Will with barely a command is also evidence enough. He watches Mischa take everything in as they walk, eyes lingering on the cats before turning to the dogs with more interest.

Inevitable.

Hannibal meditates on the swinging of Winston's fluffy tail and hopes Mischa finds one with less hair to offer the expensive carpet of his study.

They pass the play areas and Will makes another sound that Winston hones in on and obeys, turning to trot back to the door they had walked through, lever up on his back legs to push it open.

"Someone has to watch the shop," Will comments, to Mischa's delight and Hannibal's surprised smile.

"How long have you had your boy?" Mischa asks, always interested, always eager. Once the initial nervousness new situations bring on passes she is unstoppable.

Will takes a breath and holds it, perhaps counting, perhaps for dramatic effect.

"He came from K9 with me," he says. "Two years there, two here."

"You always worked with dogs?"

"Yep."

"Do you just have the one?"

"Mischa," Hannibal sighs, but finds the young man is not at all put off by the childish enthusiasm before him.

"Seven," Will admits, hand up to rub the back of his neck again as Mischa gasps in delight and Hannibal's brows draw barely in surprise. "Not counting the kids I take home over the weekend."

"I want seven," Mischa lilts, and Will laughs, a sound Hannibal finds entirely soothing, welcoming, a comfort. His face lights up with the sound and Hannibal wonders how old the man before them is.

"Let's see if we can find you one, first."

It's not uncommon for children to need service animals, but - Will recalls from the file that Bev shared with him that morning - it is rare for a child to need a service animal for this. Will resists the urge to let his mind wander, to seek out what may have happened that would lead to someone so young being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

He'd rather not know, in truth, and instead focuses on her enthusiastic grin, opening the door to let her in to meet the dogs.

There's no need to inform her behavior - she's more than well-behaved enough already, and courteous with Winston - and Will watches her pass, following in behind Hannibal and closing the door.

"The dogs are all heavily socialized - not only with other dogs, but especially with people. We take them out and encourage people to pet them, babies to elderly folks, big groups of tourists around the monuments, everyone. They'll be approached and a big part of what we do in working with rescue dogs is teaching them how not to be nervous around that. After that it becomes more specialized - will they be for assistance around the home, for the visually or hearing impaired, or as a companion," Will adds, careful about the language he uses, and blushing a little with the sudden outpouring of words and enthusiasm.

Hannibal lifts his chin in a nod, watching Mischa as she stops, wide-eyed and eager and entirely unable to decide which dog to pet first. There are a few smaller ones, but as Hannibal knew she would, she makes her way to one of the largest, a big German Shepherd lying sprawled comfortably who sits up as she approaches.

“You were in the police,” he observes, and Will nods.

“Not long,” he answers, and then smirks a little, leaving Mischa and the dogs their space. “Long enough.”

Curious.

Hannibal keeps his eyes on Mischa for a time, watching as the dogs come to swarm her in a warm mess of fluffy bodies, and she makes the effort to touch or cuddle every single one.

"She would benefit from a larger dog," Will says, smiling at the note of tension in Hannibal at the words, "from what you have described of her condition. Companion animals for PTSD are as much an anchor as anything. Being able to hold the dog will help with the attacks, also a larger dog is more likely to keep her safe should she try to hurt herself during an episode."

Hannibal's tension runs through his spine, up to his shoulders and sets his jaw. Will speaks of the condition as a man of experience, almost clinical in his analysis, calm. He does not patronize Hannibal his lack of it, does not ostracize as he himself most likely is, for having it.

"She has never had violent episodes," Hannibal notes softly, watches as Will’s smile soothes to something gentle, understanding not pitying. "Has your dog helped you?" Hannibal asks suddenly, as much for pure curiosity as to direct the conversation from Mischa a moment more.

The question gives Will a moment of pause, but only just a breath before he nods, entirely earnest. “He has. Immensely, really. People want to help but,” he hesitates, seeks the right word, and fixes his glasses higher up his nose once it’s found, “they aren’t there with you, inside, when it’s happening. It’s a - a terrifying loneliness. He’s very good at noticing it before I do,” Will admits, with a small smile. “Quick on the draw to pull me back before I go too far away.”

Color floods Will’s cheeks again but he pays his own embarrassment little mind - there’s no room for it here, when his own condition can benefit another. He raises his eyes again to watch Mischa, unable to resist a smile as her cheek is licked and she laughs.

A distance, brief, in his eyes as he tries to imagine the way he feels, but being so young when it happens, and the thought ricochets a shiver up his spine, barely suppressed.

“I feel it most often at night,” he admits, reminding himself to be open about this. Honest. “And when you - I, when I wake up into it, I can be in another place, another time entirely. Winston’s there, though, wherever I am. He’ll lick my hand, push his big wet nose on my face,” Will smiles a little, “bark sometimes, if that’s not enough. There’s a responsibility there, to him, too - he needs me as much as I need him.”

Hannibal just watches, holding his expression impassive.

It is that helplessness that he hates the most, that inability to take Mischa from the horrors behind her eyes, or even join her there so she is not alone. That inability, that uselessness... same now as it had been then, and here he cannot save her.

"She tries to be quiet, some nights," Hannibal says, voice low, though Mischa is too preoccupied with the dogs to bother listening. "I hear her still but I give her that chance to try, on her own."

He shrugs. "Some nights are quieter than others."

Will nods, and Hannibal can feel those blue eyes on him while he himself is looking away. He wonders if perhaps that is why the man is so reluctant to make eye contact, his own experience and fear. He does, however, catch his eyes when he turns, for just a moment, before Will looks away.

Another click of his tongue and the dogs all sit, some faster than others, tails beating against the floor in canine joy, and Mischa sits amongst them with a smile on her face Hannibal has not seen in a long time.

"Which one can I have?" she asks, eyes on Will as the other smiles, lifts his arms in a shrug.

"See which one chooses you," he prompts, giving Hannibal and apologetic nod before stepping closer to the gathered pack. "It's as much their choice as yours."

There's a tap on the door and Hannibal turns, not quite startled, to see a tall, dark-haired woman smiling at him, leaning on the doorframe and keeping the door mostly closed against curious dogs.

"They'll be at this a while." She nods towards Will and Mischa, both engrossed, now, in conversation as around them the dogs meander, nuzzle Will's hand or bump up against his hip where he crouches. "Choosing a companion is the most important process, and despite how long it might take, Will has never once been wrong in which animal to release."

Hannibal swallows, cannot quite bring himself to return the expression sent his way. They both smile so much, yet never is it false, never is it put on for show. He wishes he had the luxury. Beverly flicks her hair, the gesture as much directing as it is reflexive.

"Come on," she coaxes. "You need coffee and I need some information from you to get this ball rolling."

She notes the moment of hesitation, the lingering worry tensing the corners of Hannibal's eyes as he glances back towards his sister. Will's eyes meet his, an instant held, a hint of a smile, and then away again.

"She'll be fine," Bev says softly. "Promise. She couldn't be in better hands."

Hannibal follows, apprehensive still, and Bev ushers him into the little office, piled high with files and ledgers. A coffee maker sits bubbling and she pours them each a cup.

"Sugar, milk?"

"Neither, thank you."

When she settles again, a fresh file across her lap, it's with a curious attention, eyes bright and sharp, smile lingering.

"Cute kid."

"Precocious," Hannibal adds, picking a stray dog hair from his pant leg, and smoothing the fabric out beneath careful fingers.

"Tell me about yourself," Bev suggests, cup cradled in her hands. "We can start with the basics - age, occupation, source of income, estimated yearly, relationship status, children, so on."

Hannibal hums, but it is not in irritation, merely contemplation. Interviews like these, innocent as most are, always lead to more questions than Hannibal cares to answer. He prepares himself, as always, and obliges.

"My charge, you have met, I have no children of my own. She and I live in our home together, and, for the time being, we are sustained by our inheritance," he swallows, licks his lips. "I have two years left at Johns Hopkins before I am qualified as a surgeon."

Bev watches him carefully before nodding, permission to go on or understanding it is unclear. Hannibal takes a moment to regard the coffee in his hands.

"Our parents are no longer with us, and I am finding it more and more challenging to help Mischa deal with her condition on my own. When I do not study, I intern at the hospital."

"Johns Hopkins was mine, too," Bev notes, taking a sip and setting the cup aside. "Art, if you'd believe it, before the sciences tugged at me enough to pull me away from my pencil. You wouldn't think it, with this," she gestures, smiling, takes up a pen to spin expertly between her fingers. "But there’s something about wanting to help people that doesn’t let you go, once it starts, and animals need just as much support, if not more, sometimes."

She hesitates. "You can't be much older than I am, if you're nearing graduation."

"25," Hannibal replies. Bev grins at that.

"Same as Will. Puppies, both of you. Alright. I need you to sign a few things. Most are permissions, for background checks for the animal's safety, authorization for Will to come by and see the property just once to confirm the animal will be living in good conditions and with enough space to run around." She passes these over, a pen on top. "A form with your basic details for contact information. Our program offers ongoing support free of charge if you need help with the companion or believe the wrong one has been issued you."

"Thank you."

The forms are filled in carefully, handwriting neat - a constant amusement for Mischa, who points out that he will need to abandon his penmanship if he is to have a chance as a doctor's scrawl - and signed at the bottom. Then Hannibal allows a soft sound, like a laugh, before settling back.

"I am about to become a parent to two restless creatures."

She takes the papers back, glancing towards him before checking quickly through the signatures, and taps them into order against the desk. “Hopefully a little less restless than before,” she offers, pleased, it seems, by what she’s seen of the man and the information provided. “There’s an adjustment period, the time it takes to learn each other’s rhythms, behaviors. You seem a little new to these kinds of things - I’d be glad to ask Will to come out and help teach you a bit more, and work with both of your creatures.”

There’s something there, beneath her words, a mischievous note plucked amongst the genuine offer, and Hannibal’s brow raises just an increment before he nods.

“I think that there’s much to discuss,” he responds, and then adds, “between Mischa and Will.”

Bev grins a little, and agrees, “Good matches all around.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> It’s so much information to take in, being inside someone’s home. Every rug, every book, every strip of wallpaper or knick-knack is a choice, made deliberately and with personal consideration, that tells Will always far more than he usually wants to know about a person. And this - this is extraordinary. A foyer, of all things, a rising enormous staircase, rich florid decor with strange statuary and taxidermy and -
>
> “Is that a harpsichord?” Will asks before he can stop himself, squinting through to the living room.

Will checks the address three times before he approaches the door.

The house is enormous, bigger than most even in the well-appointed neighborhood, the likes of which Will didn’t imagine existed inside Baltimore proper. It almost seems pointless to verify that the home has enough space for a dog - there’s more space in one floor of the three stories than in Will’s entire house - but there’s more to this than just having ample room, Will reminds himself.

Or pristinely kept front grounds.

Or miraculously clean windows.

He checks the address one last time before ascending the steps, coat tugged a little closer against the autumn chill, and knocks on the door.

He tries to wipe Bev's grin from his mind, the way she had nearly bounced beside him as she told him where he was going. How she had talked endlessly of the *single* soon-to-be doctor he would be spending an hour with today.

"More, if he asks you to dinner," she'd said.

"He won't."

"Have faith, Kinsey Six," Bev had grinned. “Maybe he wants a comfort animal too."

Will nearly jerks when the door opens and offers his best smile to Mischa, at the door.

"Hey kid."

She grins, small enough that the top of her head reaches Will’s stomach when she stands like this, before glancing behind him.

"No Winston?"

"He doesn’t make house calls with me," Will shrugs, "someone has to watch the shop." A pause. "Can I come in?"

"I suppose." Another grin, and Mischa steps aside, still holding the door as Will takes a step into the house and bends to unlace his boots.

She nods her sage approval, arms folded across her chest. A plaid wool skirt above stocking feet, a sweater the same red as the stripes that form the pattern, and hair braided back neatly, a far too orderly appearance for a little girl who seems so eminently mischievous. “Shoes stay by the door, and coats hang there,” she informs Will, pointing to the rack beside him. He follows her instructions, letting her hold his notebook as he shrugs out of his coat, and unwraps his scarf to loop over it.

“Just you today?”

“No,” she sighs, opening the pages before he can stop her. “Hannibal’s upstairs. He said he had to put a jacket on. I asked if we were going somewhere and he just told me to get the door.”

Seemingly disinterested in Will’s rough scribblings, she hands the notebook back to him and beams, dark eyes bright. He raises both brows, drawing a breath enough to speak but it’s interrupted as she asks, “Can I name her?”

“Name…”

“...the dog you’re going to bring for me.”

“They have names already, usually,” Will answers, unable to hide the upturn of a question, just as he is unable to hide his mild discomfort with the whole situation. He’s never been fond of doing the visitations, but Bev had - of course - insisted and threatened to put him on poop duty for weeks if he’d continued to decline.

It’s so much information to take in, being inside someone’s home. Every rug, every book, every strip of wallpaper or knick-knack is a choice, made deliberately and with personal consideration, that tells Will always far more than he usually wants to know about a person. And this - this is extraordinary. A foyer, of all things, a rising enormous staircase, rich florid decor with strange statuary and taxidermy and -

“Is that a harpsichord?” Will asks before he can stop himself, squinting through to the living room.

"A family heirloom," comes the accented voice from Will's left, and he turns to it, surprised yet again at how unusual yet fitting it is that Hannibal has an accent and his sister does not. Hannibal smiles with his mouth today, and Will feels almost cheated when he can't gather the same warmth he had when the man had smiled just with his eyes.

"Do you play?" he asks instead.

"We both do. When Mischa is feeling up to obedience in her lessons."

Hannibal is in a blue suit today, tailored and surprisingly not gaudy on someone so young. Will imagines he wears little else, even in the comfort of his home.

"Can I offer you a drink?"

In any other context, Will would hardly hesitate to take the man up on something strong enough to ensure he couldn't drive home for quite some time, but as it stands - notebook in hand, Mischa watching them both, and Bev's voice a distant harry behind him - he only allows a wan smile, as equally restrained as the one that Hannibal himself gave.

"If you have tea, or - water would be fine, too," Will hesitates, and turns open his notebook.

Down to business, focused, and certainly not entirely distracted by the way that Hannibal's hair slips into his face, a deliberate touch of untidiness to suggest a more casual look than if those particular strands had been tucked back smooth with the rest.

"I'll need to just see the place, generally, to get a gauge for space and ah," Will chews his lip a moment, flustered, "dog-readiness. And the yard, if you have one. I won't be long."

"Take your time." Hannibal lets Mischa lead the way, follows behind Will. In the kitchen, he sets to preparing tea while Mischa meanders around Will and asks him endless questions.

"You remember the dog that liked me right?"

"Right."

"What's her name if I can't give her one?"

"Maggie."

"That's a silly name."

"What would you name her?"

Mischa says something that makes Will blink, frown in confusion, and Hannibal has to smile.

"It means firebird," he translates. "A folktale, and a powerful creature."

"Oh."

The questions continue, but to his credit, Will manages his work quickly despite that. The entire first floor is deemed perfectly habitable, the yard a good size for a dog of Maggie's needs. Hannibal watches him with Mischa, how slowly she manages to soften him to her, how that confidence he had seen among the dogs returns in increments as a blush would against Will's cheek.

"You could call her both, I think," Will suggests as they pass through again from the yard. "Maggie will get her attention but a nickname, the name you liked, she would learn that too,

in time. She’s very smart, Miss Maggie.”

Mischa grins back over her shoulder, turning to wait as Hannibal extends the cup of tea to Will. He tucks his notebook beneath his arm, takes it with both hands, and blows across it, eyes turned upwards. He shouldn’t be so able to meet the man’s eyes as he is, shouldn’t be so comfortable with any of this, really - someone else’s home, children generally, the added weight of knowing that the little girl shares the same haunting that Will does, ghosts unseen by others but all too real to them.

And yet as he sips the tea, and catches the little crinkle in the corners of Hannibal’s eyes again, he feels himself grow suddenly warm, and not from the drink.

“Perfect,” Will offers, turning his attention away with a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“Can I take her on walks?” asks the girl, and Hannibal clucks his tongue, once. She wrinkles her nose at him and looks expectantly towards Will, who nods.

“Of course. She’s big but she won’t pull you. I’m sure she’d like walks, or trips to the park.”

The little girl’s grin appears again, and for a moment, it’s hard for Will to think that her terror could ever run so deep, guileless and sweet and clever.

He hopes he can hide his own condition so well some day.

“Do you want to show me the upstairs?” Will asks, to one or both.

"Yes!" Mischa is off before either of them can accept the answer, both raising their eyes as her voice carries up the stairs and above them. "She will sleep in my room so you need to see that first!"

For a moment, both are silent, and Will looks down first, eyes lingering on Hannibal before slipping to the mug in his hands.

"You have infinite patience," Hannibal notes, allowing himself the luxury of a long sip of his own tea before humming gently and regarding Will.

"More with dogs than people, I will admit," Will laughs softly, thumbs caressing the cup in an absent way before he realizes the motion is being tracked and feels his cheeks warm with the thought.

Hannibal smiles and takes up his cup again.

“Less expectation, perhaps.”

Will exhales, considering, and shakes his head. “Not less - simpler.”

“It sounds as though you have your own expectations of people,” Hannibal suggests, and Will merely shrugs, sipping his tea again, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Not in what I expect of them,” he replies, “but maybe what I expect from them. Sometimes they can be surprising, though,” Will admits, glancing towards the floor above them. “She’s very brave.”

He feels the man’s warmth dim, just perceptibly, without needing to see it, a tightness in tone. “More than she should have to be.”

“Then we come back to what to expect from people. Capable of far worse things than dogs or cats,” Will murmurs, and with a sigh, a tilt of his head, the softness in his expression suggests a slight smile. “You’re brave too, you know. Bev says you’re studying surgery. Same age as me. I can’t imagine having a little sister to look after on top of all of that.”

Hannibal’s expression softens to something entirely human - and Will wonders what it was that seemed so otherworldly about him initially that he notices this so clearly - and he smiles.

"Thank you."

Will wants to say more, to encourage and comfort, to reach out and touch, but he refrains, instead finishing his tea and gesturing for Hannibal to lead him upstairs.

Mischa’s room is vast, and surprisingly tidy for a middle schooler. Soft creams and warm browns, pale pinks and blues on her bedspread and pillows. There is a small desk and bookcases filled with more trinkets than books themselves. Framed photos that Will deliberately avoids as his eyes scan the space. Mischa sits by her desk and twists the hem of her skirt in childish anticipation.

"Will she like it?" she asks, and Will pretends to consider, turning to Hannibal and finding the man pleasantly amused.

He knows, even as the bed sits neatly made and tidy and entirely unassuming, what it holds there beneath the covers. The smothering darkness, the spectres that plague them both, that desperate horrible ache when you hope the feeling will just pass, pass with only breathlessness and a cold sweat, and not drag you back to the last place you’d ever want to be again.

And so Will draws a breath, brow furrowing very seriously indeed, and he casts his eyes about the room.

“It’s pretty big,” he says, feigning uncertainty.

“It’s really big,” Mischa grins, but then catches his tone, and squints. “Why shouldn’t it be big?”

Will shakes his head a little, passing the tea off to Hannibal, who watches with interest as Will takes his notebook back out and taps his pen against it.

“My whole house is much smaller than this,” Will admits, and Mischa watches him with interest as he takes a few careful steps into the room. “Maggie’s not used to so much space. It might be a little scary for her.”

Mischa’s eyes widen. “I don’t want her to be scared.”

“No, of course not,” Will agrees, pointing with his pen as though attuned to a sudden note of inspiration. “But everyone gets scared sometimes, and you know what might help?” He sets pen to page. “Do you think you could let Maggie sleep in your bed with you? I think that would help her out a lot.”

Mischa’s face lights up as quickly as Hannibal’s falls, but it's all for show, the older brother, the authority, not one to possibly be happy with this plan.

"Yes!" It's decisive, pleased, and Will pretends to make a note in his notebook despite the approval having already entirely been completed. He enjoys the way Mischa draws her knees up in delight, at the thought of sleeping next to the big, heavy dog. Perhaps her mind has not yet connected that doing so will help her cling to something when she wakes. Perhaps she is deliberately not thinking about it, as expert as Will is at denial and compartmentalization.

"I will still need to check on her for the first few weeks," Will explains, "to make sure she's settling in well, and you two are comfortable together. Maybe if your brother allows it I’ll bring Winston over to keep you both company while we talk."

"Yes!"

"Perhaps."

Both words run over each other, and Will turns to smile at Hannibal as the other lets out a slow breath and inclines his head in acquiescence.

“Strictly protocol,” Will assures him, with a tilt of his head and a glimmer of amusement, before he turns back towards Mischa, and sets his pen to the page again, as though going down a checklist. “So you’re going to take her for walks?”

“Yes,” insists Mischa, “and to the park.”

“Good, good. And you’ll help feed her and make sure she has clean water.”

“Of course,” she huffs.

“She’ll need to be brushed sometimes - given a bath.”

Mischa nods to this as well, ducking her head to hide a broad smile against her knees as the anticipation builds.

“And she’ll sleep here with you at night, so that you’ll both know that the other one is right there with you,” Will asks, his tone gentling a little, understanding, a particular language shared, and Mischa regards him curiously, and with a somewhat more somber expression.

“I would like that,” she says softly.

Will makes the final checkmark, attributed to nothing in particular on the page, and closes the ledger. A pause, and a glance towards Hannibal as Will smiles, “I’m sure she’ll be very

happy here.”

Hannibal doesn't have time to reply before Mischa is off her chair and hugging Will’s legs tight, a childish, helpless gesture, though there is only gratitude within it, no tears, no fear here.

"Thank you,” she mumbles, and Will sets a hand against her hair gently, a little lost, otherwise, how to respond. Hannibal just watches. The way his sister accepts this man with all the trust in the world, and how Hannibal finds himself unable to do anything but the same, in his much softer, much more reserved way.

Then Mischa lets go and hugs her brother as well before leaving them be and making her way to the study.

"She reads in the afternoons," Hannibal explains as Will blinks after her. "She's always done it, it keeps her calm."

When he looks at Will again he is relaxed, if a little tired, and he gestures to have Will leave the room before him before closing the door quietly behind.

"Do you need to see much more of the house?" he asks, knowing his answer, watching as Will fidgets much like Mischa does.

Will shakes his head, nose wrinkling a little. “Not unless you’ve got something particularly unpleasant you’d like to show me,” he intones, a dry joke that falls far too awkwardly for his own comfort. “It seems fine.” Red-cheeked, he takes his tea back from Hannibal, and pointedly ignores the way their fingers brush together.

“I can send a list of things you’ll need, just generally, and some dog-proofing that would be helpful. She’s a very smart girl, though, I’m sure she’ll be on her best behavior,” Will says, pausing before he takes a sip. “Both of them, really.”

“At least get his number.”

“We have his number. It’s in the file.”

“Will,” Bev sighed, “you can’t just go around calling clients off the files. It’s unprofessional.”

Will blinked, mouth opening and closing in silence for a moment before finally he asked, “Why would I call him?”

The look she gave him across the desk was so dry that Will could feel the friction of it, eyes rolling as he sighed. “Unprofessional,” he reminded her, to which she merely grinned, devious.

“Single. Doctor.”

“You are. Awful,” Will mimicked, and was rewarded with a laugh and a pat on the head for it.

“Don’t need a seeing-eye dog to see how much you need a night out, Will. Or a night in. And out. And in. And - ow,” she laughed, as Will swatted after her with his notebook, grinning.

He draws a breath and offers out his notepad, so accustomed to a furious blush by this time of night that he scarcely notices it. “Your email might be best. I can just forward them along then.”

Hannibal considers the sudden flush to Will’s skin, the quickening of his words, the way he looks away as he holds the notepad out like a sacrifice. It is entirely endearing, and he is careful to take the notepad so Will can settle his hands against his cup and fidgets there too.

"It is easy to catch me on email," he confirms, "between classes, perhaps the best option. I rarely take calls during class unless Mischa rings."

He writes out the contact details carefully, with a flourish Mischa would scoff at, and carefully closes the notebook before passing it back.

"Thank you for taking the time," he says again, guiding Will down the stairs to the front foyer. "We both appreciate it. Please let me know if there is anything else."

"All the legal work should be done by Monday," Will says. “After that it's a fairly slow process, I'm afraid. We’ll have to be patient."

"A virtue I can boast to have," Hannibal responds, taking Will’s coat while he slips his boots back on and holding it out for him. There is an embarrassed shuffle as Will tries to hold the cup and notebook together, pen between his teeth, but he manages to accept the chivalrous gesture without upending anything on either of them.

He passes the cup back with a soft laugh and holds his hand out immediately after.

"Thank you, Hannibal, I will be in touch."

"Of course."

That soft smile again, that sends cool fingers of promise and worry tickling down Will’s spine, and he returns it with one of his own, most likely somewhat manic and nervous and he wants to kick himself.

In the car, he flicks to the page he had offered Hannibal and feels his eyes widen as his fingers curl against the cover.

In beautiful cursive, the email rests on one line, Hannibal’s name unnecessarily written beside. And underneath another thing, a looped and intricate set of numbers that Will is sure is not on file, and next to those, four words: *for more personal inquiries*

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> "Friday," he agrees, finding himself grinning before he forces the expression to clear. "Friday is a late day for me."
>
> There is an audible groan from Bev and a pause from Hannibal. Will holds his fingers over the receiver and mouths curses at Bev, perhaps threats, before Hannibal's voice brings him back to the now and drops out the bottom of his stomach.
>
> "Then we will have all the time in the world and very few distractions. Shall we say 8?"

From: "Will Graham"
Date: 21/07/2014 4:53 PM
Subject: Information
To: "Hannibal Lecter"

(Soon to be) Dr. Lecter -

Hope Mischa and yourself are doing well. We're waiting for some final insurance paperwork to go through for Maggie, and in the meantime, she's been staying with me to get used to being in a house all the time again, sleeping in a bed, following Winston's lead during episodes, etc. Hard at work, as are we all.

Attached are two documents - one of basic things you'll need to take care of to keep a dog, the other reviews Maggie's training and commands to which she responds. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Best wishes on your upcoming exams,
Will Graham
@ Katz & Dogs

> CompanionCareChecklist.pdf
> Commands.pdf

From: "Hannibal Lecter"
Date: 21/07/2014 5:09 PM
Subject: Re: Information
To: "Will Graham"

(Now former) Officer Graham,

Thank you for the email, incredibly prompt and detailed and much appreciated.

Mischa and I are as we always are. She has demanded I pass on to you that she has been practicing sleeping with a large pillow where the dog will soon be. So as not to roll and hurt her in the night, she says. She is very dedicated to preparing her room for Maggie. It has given her something to concentrate on, her nights have been easier.

I believe you have me in your debt, Mr. Graham, I am not at all experienced with working with dogs in the literal sense - all sent information will be studied and put to practice - and you will excuse my awful pun in the figurative.

Much obliged for the well wishing, though they are some few years away yet.

Highest regards,
Hannibal Lecter

From: "Will Graham"
Date: 21/07/2014 5:14 PM
Subject: Re: Information
To: "Hannibal Lecter"

Not-yet-for-several-years-apparently Dr. Lecter,

It's great that Mischa is already thinking about these things - part of what makes this all work is the responsibility you have, and although sometimes it's... very hard to go about it, you know you have to. You might have to remind her about this sometimes, but I think you'll be surprised at how quickly she starts to come around out of an almost-episode once you let her know that Maggie still needs to be fed - things like that.

We don't want to disappoint the animals in our lives any more than the people, and knowing how simple their expectations, how lacking in judgment they are seems to make it a little easier.

Well, at least I can say that I was the first to wish you good luck on your tests. Sorry about that - Beverly keeps mentioning how you're going to become a doctor and I thought maybe it was sooner, then. Although she also said we're the same age, so I suppose I should have thought about it more.

I'll forgive your awful pun if you can forgive my bad math. Deal?

Best (just in general),
Will Graham
@ Katz & Dogs

From: "Hannibal Lecter"
Date: 21/07/2014 5:20 PM

Subject: Re: Information
To: "Will Graham"

Forgiven-not-forgotten Mr. Graham,

The therapy had been recommended by the woman who oversaw my transition from psychology to surgery, here, I trust her implicitly, and as your words mirror hers, the trust is now shared. I have every faith that Mischa will benefit from her companion.

Miss Katz is well, I hope? A very enigmatic individual, well-suited for art and the sciences both. You are both doing incredible work with the shelter, it is not going overlooked, I assure you, by anyone you have touched.

I can only hope to repay you for your kindness.

Perhaps dinner?

Regards (still the highest),
Hannibal Lecter

From: "Will Graham"
Date: 21/07/2014 5:34 PM
Subject: Re: Information
To: "Hannibal Lecter"

Increasingly-precarious-in-your-regarding Mr. Lecter -

Bev sends her particularly enthusiastic regards from the office here. That is what I'll choose to convey of what she said, the rest... well... enigmatic is certainly one word for her. Overzealous is another. We've known each other seven years now, and she was quick to give me a place to work after I was injured and declined coming back to the force. It was a good fit, really - I trained a lot of the dogs still on the K9 unit in NOLA district.

Why the change from psychology to surgery, if it's not out of line to ask? Since we're getting to know each other and all.

You are really very kind in your praises, and in your offer. You seem to know your way around a tea kettle well enough for me to trust your judgment in where you'd like to meet with me. Although if this is to discuss Mischa, while I'm happy to share as much of my experiences as I'm able, I'm limited to that, really, not being a professional (or eventually-to-be-professional, such as yourself).

Though I guess if this dinner is not explicitly to discuss Maggie or Mischa, then disregard the above and instead pretend I've said something very clever and not entirely embarrassing.

Regards (trying it on for size),
Will Graham

From: "Hannibal Lecter"
Date: 21/07/2014 5:38 PM
Subject: Re: Information
To: "Will Graham"

Clever Mr. Graham,

The change came as a personal decision. My father was a surgeon, and although psychology is something I find truly fascinating, I wish to honor his memory with my dedication to his field. It is highly likely I will find the time to return to my studies of the mind sooner than my hands save a life. I do not do well with tedium.

Beyond my study in surgery, I must warn you that I have a prior degree in both kettle handling and dinner preparation. The first and only secret I can share with you regarding both is that good wine counts for more than practice.

The wine, however, I can share without restriction beyond the capacity of my cellar.

The dinner will be explicitly to discuss Maggie and Mischa, unless it is arranged through the number supplied.

I await your call,
Hannibal

"Are you *kidding* me, Graham?"

Will rolls his eyes towards the ceiling but still sees Bev's incessant grin from his peripheral, and so closes them instead with a long sigh.

"It's not professional."

"You're damn right it's not," she exclaims. "And who cares if it isn't? He wants to make dinner for you," she groans, leaning so far over the desk that her forehead comes to rest against it. "He's smart and responsible and *fucking gorgeous* and he wants to make dinner for you, Will, if you don't call him I'm going to."

Another long-suffering sigh, as Will glances past his fingers, digging into his own eyes, and watches her display. "I don't even know what we're meeting about. At least if I email him back then - then I know -"

"You are exhausting me," Bev intones, pushing to sit up again and roll her chair out from the desk towards his all at once. "Do not email him. Pick up your phone and call him. It's late enough that he's probably not even in class anymore."

"And then what?"

"And then you go and you have dinner with a handsome, European future surgeon!"

"But there's no *reason* for it."

"You," she laughs, disbelieving. "You are the reason for it. Is it so hard to think that someone would take that kind of interest in you? You know damn well you're not that damaged."

Will hums a note of disagreement, and no sooner shakes his head than the notebook is tugged from beneath his hand.

"Bev!"

She spins backward in her chair, hitting the door with enough of an impact to nearly lose Will's phone, picked up where he'd forgotten it earlier in the dog room. Her laugh grows louder, and then suddenly quiet as Will reaches her, wide-eyed as the sound of ringing emits tinny from the speaker.

Eyes narrowed, Will snatches the phone and switches it off speaker.

"Come on!" she exclaims, and he holds up a finger to hush her, grimacing as he hears the man pick up.

"H-Hi," Will stammers. "Doctor - no, not doctor, we went over that. Mister Lecter. Hannibal. Hello. This is Will."

"Hello, Will."

Will can hear the smile in his voice and feels his own lips respond in a similar way before he parts them.

"I'm calling in regard to the email - the dinner."

"Regards suit you," Hannibal comments, and Will can hear the sound of papers being shuffled in the background and nearly curses at having interrupted the man. In front of him Bev makes grabbing motions for the phone and Will hoists himself onto the desk.

"Perhaps they are indeed your size."

Will ducks his head and bites back a grin.

"I'm learning from the best."

A laugh, then, and Will holds his breath, pushing out a foot quickly to catch Bev before she can grab for his phone again.

"I know well how busy one grows throughout the week, perhaps Friday, then, for dinner? If all goes well, Maggie will be with her new friend and we will have most of that time to ourselves and the wine."

Will puts his other foot out to settle both on Bev's shoulders now, holding her at bay.

"Friday," he agrees, finding himself grinning before he forces the expression to clear. "Friday is a late day for me."

There is an audible groan from Bev and a pause from Hannibal. Will holds his fingers over the receiver and mouths curses at Bev, perhaps threats, before Hannibal's voice brings him back to the now and drops out the bottom of his stomach.

"Then we will have all the time in the world and very few distractions. Shall we say 8?"

Will, by some miracle, manages to keep his voice steady, even as he feels his face flush warm at the man's particular choice of words, and certainly the framework he's laying out in advance.

"I'd have to bring Winston along," Will warns mildly. "I'd be coming from work."

Twisting beneath Will's legs, Bev reaches towards the desk enough to steal off a slip of paper, tugging it closer with her fingertips and snatching a pen to write.

"More company, then, for Maggie and Mischa both," Hannibal responds agreeably, before adding, wry, "and what's a little more hair on top of what I'll already need to clean."

Bev holds up her note that reads, in big block letters *YOU ARE SO BAD AT THIS*

Grin widening, Will forces his eyes towards the floor. "Should I - bring anything? Or… do anything?"

"Would it be a very cheap line to imply that you need only bring yourself?" comes the warm response. Another shuffling of pages and Will clears his throat before he can start to laugh nervously and not stop.

"I'll forgive it."

"Much obliged. Eight o'clock, then, this Friday, Will."

"Yes."

"I look forward to it. Have a good evening."

Will lets his phone drop, hand limp and lips still parted on a grin of utter disbelief before it melts to horror.

"I'm going on a date. I'm - fuck - you, this is on you."

Bev just laughs, hugs Will's legs before standing to push the chair back to behind her desk.

"May the force be with you, young padawan. Bring condoms."

Will makes a noise he isn't sure is human, and Bev dodges a squeaky rubber ball thrown in her direction with a laugh.

-

At his desk, Hannibal presses his fingers against his eyes and tries to hide a smile. Mischa grins, setting her piece of paper on his desk on top of his reports and skipping off to her room. When Hannibal allows himself to look at it again, he sees in big bright letters, in highlighter green, the word *smooth* and he has to wonder again about just how much Mischa notices and does not say.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> "I know you'll take good care of her, and she of you," Will says.
>
> "Will you take good care of Hannibal?"
>
> Will balks, eyes wide and lips parted and he almost falls back from his crouch to the floor. Mischa's smile is mischievous.
>
> "He likes you," she says. "You think he spends so long on dinner for me?"

Will has barely shut off the car - no need to check the address, this time - before the door to the house opens with a bright light thrown across the night-dark lawn. He'd hoped for a few minutes to rev himself, to call Bev for another *go get 'im* speech and once again insist that he'd be going, with no intention to *get*. A few minutes to pat the dogs, to catch his breath, to have even a moment before…

"Hi," Will says, though the little girl can't hear it from outside the car, face and hands pressed eagerly to the glass. He waves a hand a little, to coax her back enough that he can open the door, and finds any breath he'd managed to catch promptly stolen again by the man making his way across the yard after his sister, wry amusement already twisting his lips up lightly.

He lets his gaze to linger a moment more on the man's long legs, the fine suits reduced to a simple elegance, dark slacks and a wine-colored Oxford, sleeves folded up to the elbows, and with a sigh, regrets that Bev isn't there.

He could hug the life out of her right now.

"Will," interjects the little voice from his side, and Will snaps back to attention, glancing down at Mischa, mouth firmed in impatience. "You can't leave Maggie in the car, she wants to come out."

"Very true," Will agrees, shuttling around to the back seat. Winston is the first out, settling unleashed by Will's feet, at perfect attention despite the new neighborhood and freshly cut grass and little girl petting him absently as she waits for Maggie, who hops down with the escort of a leash that Will holds, just in case.

"Maggie, this is Mischa. I think you two have met."

Mischa makes a soft sound of utter joy but resists grabbing the dog into a hug. Will smiles and crouches to be on eye-level with the large, orange creature of unknown breeding.

"You be good," he tells her, and the dog whines softly, nuzzling his hand before Will passes the end of the leash to her and she takes it, obediently, to her new companion.

Mischa takes it and leads the dog inside, talking to her, explaining that this is her new home and she gets to sleep in Mischa's bed with her every night for forever. Will can't help but smile, hands in the pockets of his dark jeans, shirt sleeves similarly rolled, though the shirt not nearly as fine as Hannibal's.

He swallows lightly, turns his eyes to the man still watching him, and offers a smile. Hannibal returns it.

"Please," he says. "Come in."

And though the gesture suggests Will walk ahead, Will finds himself walking in stride with Hannibal.

He hesitates only by the door, stepping a little in, as Hannibal does, hesitating, stepping a little again, and finally sighing a brusque laugh before gesturing to allow Hannibal to pass.

Ignoring the rush of heat that ruddies his cheeks - the fall wind outside, surely that's what it looks like - Will watches as Mischa escorts Maggie upstairs with patient, slow steps and Will can't help but grin a little.

"If it's okay, I'll go up and check on them in a bit," Will murmurs, peeling off his loose-laced boots and nudging them beside the door, the coat hung above them. "Just make sure everyone's comfortable. I'll have to do a final check, just a little one, make sure you have - y'know - dog food, things like that. Have a few papers for you to sign too, just to finish that part of it up."

Nervous words, despite how much he knows this routine, a routine rendered suddenly challenging by the dark eyes that turn towards him from the stairs, the soft smile that lingers somewhere between admiration and gratitude, with something a little less innocent in the glint of light.

It's only then that Will realizes he's holding his breath, and sighs it all out at once with a grin, crooked and quick. "Thanks for having me over - I mean, for dinner."

"The least I can do," Hannibal responds agreeably, and motions for Will to accompany him. Winston's nails click against the tile floor, and Will is distracted enough by the quick press of Winston's cold nose to his hand that he almost misses it when Hannibal adds, "but certainly not the least I would like to do."

Will's lips part, jaw slack with silence, and he hesitates as they both approach the doorway to the kitchen. Winston ushers past, and allowing him to pass, Will steps forward a little, glancing at the fluffy tail as it passes behind him, and turning back with a breathless surprise to see Hannibal mere inches from him, in the doorway still, back against the frame.

"You'd think we'd have figured this out by now," Will whispers. "Doorways."

He wonders how those lips would feel against his and instantly regrets the thought, closing his eyes and swallowing thickly. He feels, more than hears, Hannibal laugh.

"Sometimes more complicated than expected."

A soft hand against Will’s arm and he's guided through first.

The kitchen is immense, perhaps unsurprising considering the rest of the house but still worth the intake of breath as Will looks around. One wall grows alive with herbs and sweet-smelling plants, mingling with the delicious aroma of whatever it is that Hannibal is making.

It occurs to Will that perhaps that is why his sleeves are rolled up, why he looks so casual and comfortable here. This is his theatre, a place Hannibal can direct and know what is going to happen. It's strangely awe-inspiring and Will blinks only when he hears his name spoken.

"Do you prefer red or white?" Hannibal asks him gently, smile still there from before, just as pleased, just as lovely. "I know it's late, but we are relatively young."

"Very young, still, I think," Will responds, steadying himself and adding, with a slanted little grin, "young enough that my usual answer to that question is 'whiskey'. I don't know much about wine, to be honest." He catches his lower lip between his teeth, a swell of anxiety - *should he know about wine? should he have read about it in advance when Hannibal mentioned a cellar? why didn't he go to a tasting or something before? what will Hannibal think of him for not really knowing or caring about the stuff?* - released on a puff of breath. "Red? Red."

He finds Winston ready at his side, fingers curling against his fur, behind a floppy ear to scratch there lightly.

There is a little laugh from upstairs, enough to turn both Will and Winston's attention in the direction of the stairs, but the moment passes with a slight smile before Will takes the glass from Hannibal, a faint smile exchanged, no less florid in the blush across his nose and cheeks.

"Thanks - for all of this, really, it's very nice of you," Will offers, unable to keep his eyes on the man for more than an instant at a time, eager quick glances from beneath tousled curls of hair. "Is there anything I can help with? Anything I can do at all? I feel," he pauses, and laughs around the word, "spoiled."

"Then the evening is going as planned," Hannibal smiles, deftly taking up his own glass and breathing in the smell of the wine before tasting it. When he sets it down, he returns to work, offering Will a barstool to sit on at the counter with a gentle flick of his hand.

"What you can do is let yourself relax," he adds gently, happy enough for Winston to sit at Will’s side. There is a bowl, pre-prepared by Mischa perhaps, just out of the way for him should he need water.

"I suppose you can tell me if there is anything you do not eat."

Will notes the bowl with a slight smile, another beside it for food, presumably, but yet empty. It's a relief, in many ways, to see Hannibal so unbothered by having Winston there in the kitchen, even as he's cooking. From the expansiveness of the space, the well-appointed appliances and precision of it all, it's clear that he takes a very real amount of pride in this space in particular. A relief further in not only how little Hannibal seems to mind, but how little he even seems to notice. It's always hard, meeting people in general, especially meeting people who twist Will's stomach into *such* fierce little knots, and having to constantly explain Winston's presence, behavior, purpose.

Instead, here, Winston is already accepted, as Will - most surprisingly - feels himself to be as well.

A slight smile is caught in the glass as he takes a sip of the wine and settles into the seat offered. "Horse, dog, cat, human - outside of that, anything is fine," Will grins, fingers skimming the rim of the glass in an absently suggestive gesture. "I'm really not a picky eater. Half the time I forget to do it, the other half is me hoping there's leftover pizza in the fridge."

He only just restrains a cringe as he says the words that sounded so charming in his head, and so anything-but once he says them.

"Be very careful, Will," Hannibal says, setting up a cutting board on the counter so he can speak to Will as he works. “Never tell a chef that you skip meals, they will take it upon themselves to constantly feed you."

A smile, wry, and Hannibal sets some bell peppers down to chop, fingers deft and quick, slices perfectly thin and carefully identical. Will wonders how long Hannibal has been doing this and parts his lips to ask when the other answers without prompting, reading the genuine pleasure on Will’s face.

"My mother began to teach me," he says, "when I was very young I would watch her work, and she would speak as she did, explaining her recipes and methods. I started helping her cook when I was 10, started doing it on my own as a teenager." A pause then, Hannibal’s hands stilling before he hums and turns to pour the chopped peppers into a pan. "Now it is a necessity. Though I must admit that I do take great pride in it. It is similar to surgery - both sustain life."

A smile, genuine, and Hannibal takes up his glass again.

"Did you enjoy the K9 unit?" he asks, and Will finds that the curiosity is entirely genuine.

It takes Will a moment more to turn his attention from Hannibal’s skilled hands and elegant fingers - surgery, cooking, the harpsichord, the mind can’t help but wander - and glance upward to meet his eyes, and skim away again.

“Yes,” Will finally answers, brows drawing in together in thought. “Mostly, yes. It wasn’t anything I ever wanted to do, as a kid, you know? Be a cop. But I liked animals and I’m a - a really good read with people, to make a very long story short, so it seemed like a good fit. It was, I suppose,” he admits, sipping his wine, and drawing in a long breath as he cradles it in his hands.

“It was also,” he hesitates, a slight grimace, hard to find the words for something he doesn’t really ever talk about anymore, “a lot. It was a lot. And I liked working with the dogs - loved it, really, much easier to focus on them, but I couldn’t always tune out everything else and…”

He sighs, sits back straight and, subtly, slides a hand free of the glass to drop to where Winston has sidled closer to him, to sniff Will’s hand and lick it.

“I got into a bad situation, I lost time for just a minute, a few seconds, maybe, and - the perp came after me. A minor blessing, considering he could have picked my partner, my dog, anyone else in the house, but he picked me and I couldn’t react in time.”

A deep breath held, and released. Capable of doing that, Will reminds himself. Capable of talking and being open, here, with someone else.

He suggests a slight smile. “That part, I didn’t enjoy. But the dogs, always. This is a nice resolution, really. Substantially less chance of being stabbed,” he pauses. “Again.”

Hannibal considers him and nods, checks on the food and seems satisfied to leave it to itself for the time being. He finishes his wine, does not pressure Will to do the same, and steps around the kitchen island to stand close to Will for a moment.

“Sometimes lessons must be driven into us with metal and written out in red for them to be remembered, understood.” He licks his lips, eyes narrowing gently. “It is a pity but it is certainly effective.”

There is something in his tone, something softer, something lingering from a time before this, a time before he was Hannibal Lecter, suddenly a father to his sister, not a young man with a promising future. Then he blinks and it disappears, and the look he settles on Will is much hotter, like a touch of velvet over his skin.

“Other times patience is far more effective.” A smile, then, slow, deliberate and Hannibal raises an eyebrow as though he is entirely innocent in this situation, as though he isn’t taking Will apart with a look alone, undressing him with a smile and a sigh. “Mischa is rarely allowed to stay up later than 8:30, even on a Friday evening. Perhaps you would like to make your rounds now, before she settles?”

Will draws a breath, the nearness almost tangible, already, and the fact it may become so, suddenly overwhelming. The implications are overt in the man’s words, and not unwelcome, but Will’s cheeks color a fierce scarlet and before he can say anything, he stands with a stiff nod.

“Wouldn’t want to keep either of them up past their bedtimes,” he agrees, with a soft smile - the most he can maneuver with so much uncertainty creeping cold against him - and turns to head upstairs. Winston follows without needing a prompt, close at Will’s heels as they go.

The unspoken words trail behind Will as he goes - *should have said something, should have asked what he’s after, should have let him know that it’s been so long that it’s almost all new again and more than a little terrifying, should have warned him that I'm better off sleeping alone, maybe sex, maybe, and then I'll go and that’s that* - and he hesitates by Mischa’s door,

digging his fingers against his eyes a little to clear his thoughts before he settles his glasses again, and knocks against the door frame.

“Hey,” he says, a little tense, still, words stiff in his throat despite the wine that should have loosened it all at least a bit by now. “Mind if I come in and say hi?”

“Will! Yes, please come in,” Mischa chimes, and Will tilts into her room, shoulder still pressed to the doorway.

It’s very sweet to hear her emulate her brother’s mannerisms, her brother’s speech patterns, and utterly unsurprising that she does. Maggie is already on the bed with her, though Mischa sits there with her legs crossed just stroking the dog’s head, behind her ears. Maggie looks contented, turns just barely to acknowledge Will as he comes in and kneels by them both.

"She seems to be settling well."

Mischa grins, keeps her hand stroking the dog’s head gently.

"I know you'll take good care of her, and she of you,” he says.

"Will you take good care of Hannibal?"

Will balks, eyes wide and lips parted and he almost falls back from his crouch to the floor. Mischa’s smile is mischievous.

"He likes you," she says. “You think he spends so long on dinner for me?"

"I -"

"I won't tell." She brings a hand up to draw a small cross over her heart. "But you should."

The words stick, hardly enough time to think through all of this himself, so many pathways and each equally held in light and shadow, promising and troublesome, all entirely different than the one he’s been on, with Winston. With Bev. Simplicity, to stop from having to work through situations like this one.

He coughs, a little, to try and free the words from where they snagged surprised in his throat, and he pushes a hand back through his hair. “I like him too,” Will admits, almost flinching as he does so, a passing grimace at the uncomfortable truth of it all before he adds, “and you. And Maggie. I hope we can all be friends and take care of each other.”

It’s a half-answer, but it’s as simple as he can make it right now, surely not as simple as Mischa described it, surely not as simple as Bev would have Will believe. It never is, he himself is a complication, and he exhales a deep, short breath before standing.

“Thanks for telling me,” Will adds, reaching out to pat Maggie gently again. “Hannibal said it’s about time for bed. Should I - do you want me to turn the light off?”

“Yes, please,” she replies primly. “Hannibal says that I have to make sure I go to sleep on time to,” she hesitates, squinting a little, “maintain stability.”

Will's grin is unexpected, caught behind his hand but not before Mischa sees it and smiles, mischievous.

"I'll let him know to come up and say goodnight. Goodnight Maggie - goodnight Mischa."

He switches off the light behind him, leaving the door cracked so the pup can come and go as she needs, and with a deep breath, he hopes that tonight she sleeps easy, with Maggie there beside her.

Winston is still at his heels as he returns back downstairs, a hand against the wall as he swings on quick feet into the kitchen, and tries in a hurry to forget the conversation he just had, or that an eleven year-old could startle him so entirely.

"All good," Will announces quietly. "I told her you'd be up to say goodnight. Can I help with anything?"

"If you help me set the table, I would be in your debt."

Another glass of wine awaits Will at the table, another for Hannibal as well. He notices that the wine is not set for them to sit opposite each other, but close, just the corner between them. Will swallows and goes to gather the necessary cutlery, fingers brushing Hannibal's and a shiver he can barely suppress.

"Tonight is something simple," Hannibal tells him. "Lamb, seasonal vegetables, and brown rice."

It looks far from simple, and Will finds himself smiling. He sets the table, goes to the kitchen for plates and brushes past Hannibal on his way.

It's just a passing touch, the side of his elbow against Hannibal's back, but he turns in place - maybe a little too close still - and still clutching the plates in both hands, sighs.

"Thank you again," Will manages, a slight shift of his head, a release of physical discomfort in mirror to the emotional. "I don't often get to enjoy a homemade dinner, and it's - really, it's rarer still that I get to enjoy it with company."

He doesn't explain more, certain that the nervous nausea tightening his spine to be particularly straight says more than enough as he turns towards the table again, carefully aligning the plates alongside the silverware, and stealing a sip of wine while he's there.

Will's tongue parts his lips in thought before he asks, fidgeting with a fork, "Do you often have dinners? I mean, with others? Besides Mischa, I mean, obviously - obviously with her." A pause, and he feels the color drain from him a little, he needs to talk, he needs to be open, and the only thing that comes out is a rather blurted, "It's a lot of room. That you could. Dinners, I mean. A lot of room that you could have dinners in."

Hannibal smiles. Gestures for Will to sit as he brings the food to the table, steaming and smelling delicious. He lets a hand linger against the back of Will's chair, down just against the back of his neck before he passes by again.

"We used to entertain frequently," he says, turning off the lights over the stove as he takes something from the fridge and brings that back also - fresh garden salad. "Myself, only if I host a gathering at the end of the study year. I enjoy the process, Will, the method. I enjoy watching things come together to make an entirely new whole. Which flavors mix and which do not. An experimentation, a discovery."

He stands, leans to carve the meat, setting some to Will’s plate before serving himself. The same with the vegetables and rice.

"I agree that it is wonderful to share with company," he smiles, finally moves to sit, "and you are a very welcome one."

The goosebumps have hardly abated from the fingertip brush against Will’s neck when, voices silenced beneath a sudden dissonance of pulse in his ears, Will reaches out to grasp Hannibal’s wrist before he can seat himself again. For a moment he simply holds him there, and then with a turn of his head, a lift of his eyes, and a slow stand into the half-standing, half-seated position in which they hover above the still-steaming food, Will sighs, laughing, exasperated, and meets Hannibal’s lips in a soft, simple kiss.

An experimentation. A discovery.

Almost as soon as it begun, Will drives harder against him, ensnared by the kiss and the man who returns it just as eagerly. He stands, trying not to laugh as Hannibal rises with him and Will pulls himself closer, clumsy fingers against the table to guide him around it and bridge the corner that had wedge its way between them.

Perhaps they’ll mix. Perhaps not.

And at the moment it couldn’t matter less, when a rough shiver shakes down his spine and he presses his hands to Hannibal’s cheeks, finally breaking the kiss to choke down a gasping breath, heart thudding with such force that it causes echoes in the tremors of his fingers.

Hannibal smiles, ducks his head to press their foreheads together, down more to nuzzle their noses together. It's soft, gentle and sweet and Hannibal kisses Will again when the other opens his mouth to apologize.

He can feel the tension ease out of Will, can feel the way his fingers linger before they slip over Hannibal's shoulder, other hand at his hip. Just holding, just pressing, enjoying this, allowing himself to let his heart speed only for enjoyment, no longer panic.

A soft laugh, and Will doesn't know if it's his or Hannibal's, before Hannibal takes one step back, another, and brings a free hand back to catch the chair and sit, pulling Will on top of him in a slumping kneel, pulling back to laugh properly, hands settling on Will’s hips as he adjusts, feels Will straddle him in the heavy wooden seat.

"Missing dinner would be rude," Will gasps.

"Forgiven."

Will grins, and his entire body rises against Hannibal's as he buries himself in another kiss, teeth catching Hannibal's bottom lip for an instant before crushing their mouths together enough that Hannibal has to rest his head back beneath the weight of it, an eager, driving thing into which Will stifles a moan that would be much more in any other time and place.

Without warning, and certainly without his prompting, Will's body comes alive, shivering eagerly and arching as Hannibal's hands skim from his ribs down to his hips, to feel the undulations that Will didn't realize he was performing. Eager curls of his body, a need, profound, to be touched, to touch, to feel and be felt in kind.

"Christ," Will sighs between them. "It's been a long time."

A moan, gasped in surprise as Hannibal's hands slip lower to rest against Will's thighs, and he in turn works his fingers into the man's hair, to tousle it and see it as undone as Will would like to see the man himself be.

Everything else can wait, Will decides, as his eyes roll closed in a low groan when Hannibal kisses him back just as fiercely, and Will bends until the edge of the table presses sharp into his spine.

A consummation of so much patience, so many days, hours, waiting, feeling out the potential for this and allowing Will to take the step himself. And now he pushes against him, rocking forward, lips parted and wet, breathing harsher and so honest, here, so open without the fear of rejection or restriction and Hannibal relishes it.

He turns his head into the hand that tousles him, kisses along Will's wrist, his arm, to the tickling crook of his elbow before his lips stroke higher still, over the crumpled, soft fabric of Will's shirt to the warm skin of his neck, tracing the tendons stark against his throat, allowing his tongue to wet the skin before he sighs over it, grinning as Will shivers.

Then he bites down, gently, hand cradling the back of Will's head, the other still down to hold against his thigh, and delights in the sound Will makes.

Head let to loll back in abandon - no mind for warnings, hell, no mind for dinner now - Will keeps his fingers curled into Hannibal's hair and holds him there, against his neck. He inhales sharply past bared teeth when Hannibal's teeth press into his skin again, and it's all Will can do not to just let go and give into an utterly debauched moan. Instead, he stifles it down against Hannibal's hair, as the man's fingers work free the top few buttons of Will's shirt.

A mind, still, for Hannibal's sleeping sister upstairs, even as the rest of his common sense falls as much by the wayside as the forgotten dinner.

"We," Will swallows hard, "should - we shouldn't..."

He only just bites back another high whimper as he feels Hannibal's broad hand spread across his chest, shirt half-undone now and hanging off Will's shoulder, his body flushed pink and warm. Hannibal raises his attention at the words, eyes starless dark from beneath his mussed hair, lips damp and soft and slightly parted, and Will has to bite his lip to stop from moaning just at the sight of him.

“Nevermind,” breathes Will instead, and shoves their mouths and bodies together again. Quick, ragged breaths through his nose, eager fingertips pressed against the firm curve of Hannibal’s cheekbones, and body more out of his control in every passing turn of his hips down against the man beneath him.

It's addictive: the sounds Will makes, the way his breathing hitches and his body turns, shivers, arches. It has been a fair long while for Hannibal, as well. No time for such things with the death, with Mischa’s struggle, with Hannibal's own. He had wanted, of course, but had always stopped, always restrained himself, reigned it in. But Will...

He pulls free from the kiss and ducks his head as he brings his hand down to work the button and fly of Will's jeans, laughs softly when Will’s hand, sure, goes to do the same with Hannibal's slacks.

Like teenagers fumbling in the back of their parents' borrowed car, trying to be quick during a short drive to the park, keeping quiet, windows open to allow the smell of sex to dissipate as soon as it floods the vehicle.

"Will -"

And it's said like a prayer, breathy and hot and Will’s entire body shivers with the word, the sound of his own name and nothing more. They should stop. They should be adults about this, both old enough to know better.

"We could," Will swallows, bites his lip as Hannibal’s hand rubs against him through the thin fabric of his boxers, Will already utterly embarrassingly hard. "Upstairs maybe?"

"Mischa -"

"Right."

A gasp that pulls a click from Hannibal’s throat before he laughs, shaking and breathless, as Will’s fingers find him too, and touch just as surely, just as desperate there to feel him hot against his palm.

"Couch, though?" he offers, amused, voice accented more now that he no longer consciously controls it.

“Couch,” Will agrees, a breathless laugh in the word, unable to stop himself from kissing Hannibal again and again and again, fingers splayed against the firm outline of his cock, unwilling to relinquish the awkward grasp against him but forcing himself to draw his hand away.

“God,” he gasps again, another kiss so hard their lips are caught between their teeth, almost painful and entirely thrilling. “God, okay - fuck. Couch.”

In a heave of movement, Will pulls his legs free and slides back off of Hannibal’s lap. He staggers a little, scarlet-cheeked and bright-eyed, and grasps the man’s hands in his own, fingers laced, palms pressed together. A lean, into another smoldering kiss as Hannibal

stands, and so joined, Will stumbles backwards towards the living room, grinning when Hannibal frees a hand to wrap an arm around his waist instead and pull him close, walking against him as they go.

Will holds his pants up with one hand, the other still pressed tight against Hannibal's own, awkward in their movements, youthful and needy and giddy with the sensations both have denied themselves for far too long with a mind for propriety and responsibility and all those other tedious things that seem so very pale by comparison to this.

He goes down first when the couch comes up behind his legs, a clumsy drop back onto the plush velvet and eyes turned up towards Hannibal as he sets his fingers against the waistband of pants and boxers alike, inching them lower and kissing the soft expanse of belly that Will reveals eagerly. Warm lips press to the heated skin, to the dark trail of hair there, a whimper caught on every breath.

Hannibal groans, a soft sound, controlled, and slides his hands through Will's hair, down against his jaw, down to his neck, shoulders... and pushes him to lie back, swallowing the soft keen of disappointment. Not here, not fumbling and desperate and quick - that particular pleasure Hannibal wants extended, enjoyed, wants to feel Will's mouth against him as much as he wants to feel Will tremble when his own swallows Will down.

He presses Will back, rolls his entire body against him in a liquid motion, trapping their hands together between them as they twist and adjust, near-rut against each other in their fervor, having ultimately waltzed their way from the kitchen here.

Hannibal wants him. All warm-limbed and shivering, imagines him in the mornings, still sleepy and smiling returning lazy kisses and arching up, face flushed as it is now, lips parted -

It takes a lot not to lose it then and there, and Hannibal pushes himself up into a kneel, back arched like a cat, and wraps his fingers around Will to stroke him properly, deliberate and sure.

"Oh," Will sputters, pressing a hand to his face and laughing lightly behind it. "Oh, god, Hannibal -"

Pleasure rumbles through the buzz in Will's ears as his body bends, spine uncoiling in a sinuous motion that pushes his hips up harder into the Hannibal's steady strokes. His head swims with sensation, with the imagination that stirs to life uncontrolled in such moments of unusual abandon. The thrill of someone who understands his conditions, has lived with someone similarly afflicted for so long already, who knows and who doesn't fear or misunderstand them, the surprising affection Will feels for them both, already, how welcome and comfortable he's been made to feel here…

A swipe of thumb and turn of wrist pulls his thoughts back to the present and tugs a low groan from his lips.

"Please, let me," Will insists, leaning up to smother another kiss between them, eyes open to see Hannibal so near, so devastatingly handsome and made more so by the freedom grasped

between them, untidied from his normal neatness and made so entirely human that Will could laugh for the loveliness of it.

Quick fingers find that trail of hair again, follow it lower beneath the band of his boxers to where his length presses stiff and flushed hot against the constraining clothing. Will grasps, tugs it free and wraps his hand around it, a long firm stroke from base to tip, eyes wide and lips parted as he watches Hannibal's expression soften, eyes fluttering closed on a quiet moan.

They find a rhythm, then, between their erratic, endless kisses, their fingers. Sometimes in time with each other, sometimes just out, to send shivers and stillness taut through their limbs. It's messy and youthful and they both entirely lose themselves to it.

Hannibal presses close, nuzzles up against Will, shares his breath as his hand slows its stroking, just to feel Will shudder and twist, begging for more with his body as his mouth sends soft gentle kisses over Hannibal's cheek, down his jaw.

"Please, please, please."

How could he deny him? How can Hannibal deny him anything, like this?

All it takes is that - a fond smile - for Will to lose himself with a shudder that tightens the length of his body, digs his heels into the couch and yanks his back into a deep arch, eyes rolling closed on a lilting, shuddering laugh.

His hands are every bit as talented as Will had imagined, and the thought shakes a longer laugh from him still as he finishes, warm streaks against Hannibal's skilled fingers, against his own bare belly, his fingers twitching tighter around Hannibal.

And in the dizzying relief, far too long delayed and over just as quickly and delightfully as it began, Will finally opens his eyes, a slow blink and a dawning grin, crooked and sweet, lip held between his teeth as he brings both hands down to cup Hannibal in them. Will drinks down every expression that tenses and loosens as Will strokes him, fingertips skirting across the tip, sliding back the skin to skim a touch across the head, breathing harder in watching Hannibal's pleasure than he had even during his own.

“Hannibal,” Will coaxes, leaning in to brush their lips together.

A moan, barely heard and almost helpless and Hannibal kisses him back, lips lightly touching but the intimacy enough and he shudders with his own release, slow breaths turned to gasps and panting, thick swallows and a gentle smile that quickly melts into a grin. Hannibal surges forward to kiss Will deeper.

"Oh.” A sigh releases all held tension in Hannibal's form and he near-melts against Will, smiling and nuzzling and kissing him, clean hand up to cup Will's face as he relaxes into this.

"I wonder," he breathes, swallowing, slowing his breath, "if I can keep my hands off you during dinner, or if that is a battle already lost."

Will nuzzles into another kiss, accompanied by a sleepy grin. “Already forgiven.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> It's a pointless protest, and Bev merely grins at him and takes her victory in stride. "You like him. I'm guessing he was good enough if your puppy eyes are anything to go by today. Hell, you like his sister, too - you got along with her better than any other kid I've seen come in. And you told him you have seven dogs and he still wanted you for dinner. If you're going to worry yourself into an early grave, the least you can do is have a good time before you get there."
>
> Will lets out another labored sigh and rests his forehead against the desk.

"So?"

"So what?"

"So how did it go?"

"How did what go."

"Dropping off the pup. Dinner. Your evening together."

A pause.

"Was it big?"

"Jesus!"

"You're avoiding the question." Bev's grin widens.

Will watches her, the pen between her teeth and the flush of amusement across her cheeks. His eyes narrow. "Mischa and Maggie hit it off straight away, and dinner was lovely," he sighs. "And I went without any more expectation than that."

"Bullshit," she laughs. "You brought condoms."

"You put them in my coat pocket without me realizing it. Do you know how embarrassing it was when I had to pay for gas?"

Her eyes roll and she squints back at him. "Oh no, someone might actually think you're having sex, what a tragic error in judgment." She sighs, good-natured, and tilts to and fro in her desk chair. "Look, the least you can do for all of my selfless efforts in the field of 'Get Will Graham Laid' is to tell me how it went. After dinner."

“During.”

“During?”

“Well,” he amends with a sigh, and a nervous ruffle of fingers back through his hair. “Before, really.”

“Before dinner,” she confirms, eyes widening and grin tilting higher still.

"Before dinner." Will swallows, keeps his eyes just to the side of Bev's to avoid meeting them. "I... sort of... kissed him. And he kissed back."

Bev's laugh is almost like a bark, triumphant and loud.

"Look at you! Initiating kisses like a boss. And I had you pegged as a failure without help."

"Thanks."

Will turns away before she can say any more, not that much would stop her, really, and busies himself with paperwork. Or, truthfully, gathering up random pages of whatever is on his desk and very carefully arranging them to keep his hands busy.

"Was he good?"

Will laughs, a helpless and soft thing and swallows again before just nodding. What more could he say, really? He has absolutely no desire to rehash his entire evening in detail to his colleague but it doesn’t mean he hasn't spent most the morning and the night before thinking about Hannibal's hands against his skin, his lips, his warm breath and soft hair and strong arms and -

"That's the lawn mowing bill," Bev laughs, as Will works said bill into the file for one of the new dogs just arrived for training. Deliberately, he sets it aside.

"You really like him."

"Does it matter?" Will mumbles. "Not like it's gonna become a thing. I mean. It won't even happen again. Just a one-off. Purely adrenaline."

“Yeah, dinner really spikes the adrenal system,” she snorts, eyes rolling, but with no sharpness in tone. She reaches out and prods him with her pen to draw his attention back to her, and his lips twist into a frown as he turns in his chair. “Don’t write it off so fast, Kinsey Six. Unless you don’t like him, of course. Then write it off and burn it, but it sure as shit doesn’t sound like that’s the case.”

Will works his lower lip between his teeth, and worries it until he imagines Hannibal’s teeth against it instead, blushing.

“So what’s up?”

It’s a blunt question, but her tone softens that much more when she says it, and Will shakes his head, twisting a finger into a curl of hair.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea,” he finally answers, face hot even under this gentler inquisition. “He’s a client - a client I’m going to have to see regularly to help his sister and the dog adjust, training, check-ins, all of it. And -”

“And?”

“And I don’t know if it’s a good idea for me to be… *seeing* anyone right now, at all.”

"Will."

A pause, before he finally looks over, expression as tragic as any of the dogs that come into the shelter for the first time.

"You're not damaged. You're a hot-blooded man who needs to get some once in a while."

He opens his mouth to protest and Bev calmly raises her voice to speak over him.

"He kissed back, right? You kissed him and he didn't go running for the hills. And neither, shockingly, did you. When was the last time that happened, huh? The last time you let yourself, without feeling like guilt had to eat you alive after?"

"*Client*."

"Business and pleasure, big deal!"

"I'm trying to help his sister. He called us for that, remember? To help Mischa deal with her trauma and teach her to cope with it with the help of a comfort animal. I doubt *she* needs someone distracting her brother when we both should be helping her."

Bev considers, goes quiet for a moment before shrugging.

"I think you're an idiot, Graham. A very well-meaning idiot but one nonetheless. Some days you gotta allow yourself to have something. Just for you. And that doctor? He's for you."

The words hang for a moment, before Will pushes a hand over his face and up through his hair.

“He’s not a doctor yet.”

It’s a pointless protest, and Bev merely grins at him and takes her victory in stride. “You like him. I’m guessing he was good enough if your puppy eyes are anything to go by today. Hell, you like his sister, too - you got along with her better than any other kid I’ve seen come in. And you told him you have seven dogs and he still wanted you for dinner. If you’re going to worry yourself into an early grave, the least you can do is have a good time before you get there.”

Will lets out another labored sigh and rests his forehead against the desk.

“How about this? If you and he try this thing for a while and it falls apart,” she shrugs, “I’ll take over training for you, so you don’t have to see him again.”

His shoulders drop, hunching inward, and she stretches to nudge his phone closer with her pen, tongue caught between her lips, pushing in little taps past Will’s defeated frame until his phone bumps against his arm.

“Don’t you have an appointment to make?”

“No.”

“Graham.”

“Fine,” he snarls softly, dragging his phone into the darkness of his folded arms. “But I’m not calling him.”

Will Graham: hello, texting to schedule a training session with Mischa and Maggie, reply when you can with good date/time

Hannibal Lecter: Mischa has German lessons after school on Thursdays.
Perhaps the days preceding? Tuesday or Wednesday would be best.
Any time that suits after 4pm.

Will Graham: Tuesday works, then she can have a day off on Weds. Can be there by 6?
Will Graham: sorry to bother during class

Hannibal Lecter: Far from a bother, a certainly welcome distraction.
6pm on Tuesday is penciled in.
Could I tempt you with dinner, again?

Will Graham: are we actually going to eat this time
Will Graham: *dinner
Will Graham: are we actually going to eat dinner this time

Hannibal Lecter: I think aiming for the first course, at least, will be a realistic and in itself pleasing struggle.

Will Graham: it doesn’t have to be a struggle, I’m coming over to work with Mischa and Maggie and you really don’t have to make dinner okay
Will Graham: I mean it was good last time
Will Graham: the dinner
Will Graham: the food
Will Graham: the food was good last time but I’m coming over to work with them

Hannibal Lecter: The offer will remain, for you to take up or ignore at leisure.
I shall not force my company on you, Will. I very much appreciate what you are doing for my sister.
6, then. Tuesday. I look forward to seeing you. And Winston, of course.

Will Graham: you're not forcing your company on me, I didn't mean that
Will Graham: I enjoyed it
Will Graham: the dinner

Hannibal Lecter: As did I. The dinner, and the conversation and company.
Think on it, Will, there is no obligation with the offer.

Will Graham: have you thought on it?

Hannibal Lecter: Often. I admit myself distracted when I prepare a meal, now. Pleasantly so.

Will Graham: I blushed over silverware having dinner the other night
Will Graham: in the interest of full disclosure
Will Graham: I should stop

Hannibal Lecter: Should you? We are as Pavlov's dogs, it would seem.
Caught in cycles of memory that bring about a conditioned response.
Perhaps just dinner would be a good idea.
Hannibal Lecter: It will allow us to enjoy meals properly, and anticipate what follows them, instead.

Will Graham: just dinner then
Will Graham: and dessert
Will Graham: god that's so corny
Will Graham: sorry
Will Graham: okay I'm just going to stop so you can actually focus and not have a thousand text messages disrupting you that all say a lot of nonsense

Hannibal Lecter: You have my focus willingly, Mr. Graham. But my lecture is about to begin and I may, regrettably, have to redirect my focus to it.
Hannibal Lecter: However, I will put great thought into what to impress you with at dinner.
Hannibal Lecter: More so with dessert.

Will Graham: no great thought necessary really, I am a man of simple needs
Will Graham: tastes simple tastes
Will Graham: I am really bad at this
Will Graham: I just want to help Mischa okay, as much as I can, and it's not fair to her if I'm distracted, I won't be helpful then, it's hard enough without… distraction
Will Graham: forget I said anything
Will Graham: Tuesday at 6
Will Graham: have a good class

Hannibal considers his phone, considers the last message lingering there before he sets it into his pocket and out of sight for the time being.

Scarcely, though, out of mind.

Will has been in his thoughts since the dinner. Since before then. He has relived every gentle touch against his skin, every warm breath and soft sound. He has relived the look on Will's face when he had cum, surprised and pleased and utterly soft. He remembers the shape of his smile against his lips.

But perhaps it would be best to leave that experience as one that will never recur. Perhaps it would be best to allow Will to do his job, to help Maggie and Mischa, to complete the checks and training and return to his life, as Hannibal will have to return to his own.

He aches at the thought.

Feels the promise of loneliness tugs at him with cold fingers and Hannibal presses his own, now, against his eyes to ward the thoughts away.

No.

This is not about him. Not about them.

This is for Mischa. Always for Mischa.

Yet Hannibal can't help allowing his mind to wander, to consider, to hope, that perhaps Tuesday will bring about a change of heart, a chance to change Will's mind.

"So just, very calmly - 'sit'."

"Sit," breathes Mischa, her hand held out in front of her just as Will has his. He grins a little despite himself as Maggie settles onto her haunches. "Good girl, Maggie."

Her smile - that pleased little glimmer in her eyes, the slight lift in her chin - mirrors her brother, the same quiet satisfaction as when Will had praised his food, at least the parts of it they managed to eat. Will shakes his head to clear his thoughts.

"Good. It's important to let her know when she's done a good job. We all like to hear when we do. Like your German lessons," he adds, mischievous, watching as the little girl seems to ruffle her feathers, preening mildly at the praise. She says something in the coarse language and Will blinks, drawing a laugh from her.

"I told you to sit," she grins, and Will smirks, standing from where he was crouched.

The garden is substantial, surprising considering the house's location in the city. It feels almost otherworldly, vines and ivies unfurling across brick walls, flowers and vegetables grasping at the last few warm days of the summer as it chills to fall. A contained wildness among the verdant leaves and fragrant blooms, a carefully untamed elegance, much like the Lecters themselves.

"What's next?"

Will blinks, turning his eyes back to Mischa, and sets his hands on his hips.

“Well, those are all the basics. But there’s more that Miss Maggie can do than that.”

“Like what?” She scuffs a foot back and forth along the ground, and pauses to rub off a smudge from the tip of her toe.

He catches his lip between his teeth, considers his words. “A lot of it isn’t really the kind of trick you can ask her to do. Some of these things she’ll just know to do, so she can help you out the way that you help her.”

“Like what?”

A sigh, brief, as Will twists a hand back through his hair and settles back onto the brick wall surrounding the roses. “Like when you have a bad dream at night,” he says gently, careful not to let his tone slip to condescending as the girl turns her attention away, superficially, but listens carefully despite.

“If you wake up and you aren’t sure where you are,” Will continues, “or you wake up very afraid. Dogs are very smart - sometimes smarter than people when it comes to things like this.”

Mischa kicks her toe against the dirt again and Maggie stands to shift closer, heavy head under the young girl’s palm until Mischa strokes it absently, finds her breathing slowing to be calm again. Will can’t help but smile a little.

“You know when I got Winston first, we were working together,” he tells her, glancing down at his own dog who sits obediently at his side, tail flicking once in a while, ears rotating to catch sounds neither Will nor Mischa can hope to ever hear.

“He was my partner when I was a cop. No greater partner than a dog. Loyal, clever, and just as selfless and you end up being towards them. He was my first partner, my last partner, and I’m lucky enough he decided to stay on as my friend.”

“What happened?”

Will shrugs.

“I was taken by surprise. The guy had a concealed weapon, last-ditch attempt to fight off the cops that failed, ultimately.”

“Was it scary?”

“Very,” Will admits, dropping his hand for Winston to nuzzle it, scratching behind his ears as he whines happily and leans heavier against Will’s leg. “Very scary. I didn’t want the man to hurt my dog, I did something stupid and got hurt. But… I don’t regret it. Not when I got to save him,” he nods to Winston. “And he now saves me.”

“When you have bad nights,” she says, glancing at him.

He nods, and reminds himself that this - really, this - is why he’s here, much as he feels his cheeks burn, a lift in his pulse. Open. Honest. To let her know she’s not alone in this, not

anymore.

“Or when I’m someplace new that makes me nervous,” he admits. “Dogs can hear and see better than we can. They would know if there was something there to be afraid us, they would let us know that. So even if I’m nervous and think there might be something scary happening, I know that if Winston isn’t upset, then there’s probably nothing to be afraid of.”

Mischa regards Maggie, seated amiably at her side, with something like a new appreciation, a wonder at her doggish abilities. “I don’t know why I get afraid,” Mischa says softly. “I try hard not to. I don’t like it and Hannibal doesn’t like it.”

“So you try to keep it secret.”

“Yes.”

“Like maybe if you pretend it’s not happening, then that scary thing will go away,” Will offers gently, stretching his legs out in front of him, a faint smile as Winston nuzzles beneath his arm and lets Will rest it across his back.

“Does it?”

A blink, as Will looks towards her again.

“Does it ever go away?”

His breath snares a little in his chest, a question he’s asked himself a thousand times if not more. A question that he hasn’t yet been able to answer, may not ever, though that an answer in itself.

“It gets less scary,” he allows. “Sometimes it’s pretty bad, but the really bad times happen less and less. I don’t know if it will ever completely go away, but,” he pauses, worries his lip between his teeth, and forces a smile. “That’s why Maggie’s here. So you can pet her and hug her, and she can show you that there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

She nods, and for a moment appears crestfallen, but the tension in her expression dissipates as Maggie turns a cold nose against her hand and licks her fingers. “Ew,” she grins, and that quickly, the mood warms, replaced with a little laugh.

Will quiets his sigh, turning his eyes from them, and nearly falls off the little brick ledge, startled suddenly by realizing that Hannibal has appeared - who knows how long ago - in the doorway.

“We were just finishing up,” Will mutters, flushed.

“It’s good you are,” the other comments, lips tilting just so, enough to have Will feel his balance shift again and thankfully not lose it. “I am just finishing up dinner. Mischa, please set the table?”

“Can Will stay?”

The question is bright, pleased, and Mischa turns back to Will with a grin on her face. For a moment Will marvels at how similarly Maggie smiles beside her, though it doesn't help him answer beyond a quietly incoherent noise.

"Perhaps if you ask him he might acquiesce," Hannibal offers, amusement brimming in his tone though he keeps his expression entirely neutral. Will isn't sure if that's worse, the way his cheeks redden. If Mischa sees or notices, she doesn't make a show of expressing it. Instead, she just says

"Will, do you want to stay for dinner?"

A swallow, a beat, and Will presses his lips together in an approximation of a frown that doesn't come to fruition properly.

"I suppose it would be rude not to."

"That sounds like something Hannibal would say," Mischa laughs, before turning to return to the house, calling for Maggie as Will had taught her, to come with her.

Soon she would follow on her own.

Hannibal murmurs something soft to her as she passes before turning back to Will and inclining his head, almost in apology.

"You are not obligated," he reminds him.

"I know I'm not," Will replies, and his tone is more curt than he means it to be. Sharp enough that he flinches as he says it, flustered, and mutters an apology past the hand that rubs over his mouth, as though to catch any more words that try to escape.

It doesn't work very well.

"I'll stay," he says instead, another quick correction. "I want to stay."

He could laugh if it didn't all feel so dire, with Hannibal watching him with those steady, serene eyes, the vague smile pressed across his lips. Will avoids his gaze but follows instead the curve of his neck, disappearing beneath a more casual sweater, the broad shoulder that leans against the doorframe.

It doesn't work very well at all.

"I told you I'm not very good at this," he insists, bitter amusement. "I should really just stick to dogs."

Hannibal smiles, head tilted, eyes barely narrowed.

"I think your charms might be lost on them. More's the pity. Shall we?" He gestures inside, waits for Will to pass through the door before him - no problem with doors today, though it is tempting to make the passage harder - before closing the door to the garden.

Inside, Mischa has set the table, wine glasses for Hannibal and Will, just one for water for herself. It's all so domestic, so normal, that Will has to smile, even as his heart hammers faster behind his ribs and Winston nudges his hand to distract him.

"What's for dinner?" Will asks, forcing his mind to the here and now, not the warm evening of last Friday where there was just the corner of the table between them, then nothing at all, then even less…

"Home-rolled pasta carbonara," Mischa announces proudly. "I made it. Hannibal helped."

"Almost like you planned this ahead of time," Will murmurs, squinting a little at Mischa in mock-suspicion, just enough that she wrinkles her nose back at him. His eyes catch Hannibal's as he turns towards the table, in an instant notes the slight widening of eyes, the faint parting of lips in gentle surprise at their interactions, already so familiar, and Will touches the back of his hand to his cheek as though to cool it, continuing without further pause.

Dinner. Just dinner.

They had said that - agreed on it, really. Just dinner.

He is not very bad at this. He is very good at this. Dinner with a friend and his kid sister and their dogs. There's nothing unusual or unexpected about it at all.

And the shiver pulls his spine rigid when he feels Hannibal's fingers follow the back of his chair and trace along his shoulders.

"Is Hannibal very helpful?" Will asks, shooting a wide-eyed look to the man as he passes by towards the kitchen without a glance behind him. "I imagine he's rather distracting when you're so hard at work, Mischa."

"He is distracting," she confides, wriggling in her seat and leaning over the table as though to keep her words between them - Will's fairly sure Hannibal hears her.

"He makes me practice all my languages while working with the recipes."

Will smiles, shakes his head in sympathy.

"Atrocious."

"Truly."

In the kitchen, Hannibal makes a soft sound like a laugh, but says nothing on the matter. Mischa casts a look his way before turning back.

"There's a lot of stuff he doesn't let me do. Like rolling the pasta. Apparently I wont be able to control the machine until I can not only reach the counter but look over it too." She seems very put out by the idea.

Will tilts his head, considering, and watches Hannibal for a moment as he fusses at the counter, doing what, Will can't begin to guess.

"If it's just a matter of height, you could always stand on a chair," he suggests, conspiratorial. "Not everyone's as tall as he is. Plenty of people eat pasta."

Her brows lift, pleased by the suggestion, and Will shares her quick little smile towards Hannibal as he regards them both at great length.

"Discussing growth," Will tells him, and to her credit, Mischa keeps an entirely straight face. "Personal growth. How many languages is it now?"

"Four," she chimes, plucking her napkin off the table to drape across her lap.

"Three fluently," Hannibal adds. "German is in progress."

"Personal growth," Will agrees, grinning broad before he catches himself and trains it to a smaller, more polite smile until Hannibal gives them both a weary look and turns away, and Will leans in again.

"Maybe it's because he knows you're a better chef."

"I think that's it," she agrees. "When I can get up early enough before he does, and make breakfast, he says it's the best he's ever eaten."

She grins, wriggles in her seat again and sits back as Hannibal returns with their meal, steaming and smelling delicious.

"You make quite a mess, though," he says, but there is nothing but fondness in his voice. He returns to the kitchen for the wine for himself and Will and Mischa grins after him.

It's easy, here, affectionate and soft. If Will had come in without knowing Mischa's trauma, as little of it as he does know, he would not have guessed that after dark the little girl in front of him falls to terror and nightmares, and the young man taking care of her to fear and uncertainty.

Will doesn't think of it.

Thinks instead of the warmth of Hannibal's hands, the sound of his voice when its hushed and pleased…

And perhaps that isn't the most appropriate thing to think of at dinner, either. He catches Hannibal's eye, when he sits again, and ducks his head.

Pavlov's dogs, both of them.

The food is satisfying, the company charming - despite their tendency to slip into languages that Will doesn't know - and the entire interplay somehow… domestic. Like a home, the likes of which Will hasn't been a part of in a very long time.

But despite how carefully he attempts to tread in their space, he's not without his missteps. Like asking Mischa about school. Will is thunderstruck by the girl's lofty dissertations on why this teacher is wrong, or why it's absurd that those two boys are fighting when it's the fault of another, and neither realizes it. Hannibal is so very still, a man of few, carefully chosen words, that it's a wonder that they exist in the same sphere together.

She is so exuberant to introduce Will to the entire cast of her classmates and teachers, that he begins to wonder how often she gets to talk about it with anyone else. The man at his side - and in that thought, certainly a twist in his stomach - is kind. Open. Generous of heart. And under a tremendous amount of pressure, and it occurs to Will as clearly as though the words were spoken between them that Mischa does not regale him in this way about her day.

She worries for him.

The same way that he worries for her.

Will finishes a swallow of wine, and listens attentively to her words, and Hannibal's quiet, until the meal is finished, and she is busked away to bed with a huff and a groan, that stop neatly when Hannibal lifts a brow at her.

She shoots Will a grin anyway.

"Will," she breathes, that sneaky low tone again. "When are you coming back?"

"Next week," he promises, just as quiet, just as sneaky as she thinks she is. "Same time, same place, if you don't mind."

"I would welcome the company," she grins, and again it sounds so much like Hannibal, words taken from her older brother as she takes his mannerisms and patience and compassion. Will marvels at the two of them.

They leave dinner at the table as Mischa makes her way upstairs and wishes them both good night. Will leaves them to their routine and returns to start clearing the table, setting plates by the sink and everything else in their approximation of a correct location. He hopes, at least, that he will be forgiven his attempts - he needs to keep his hands busy, his mind occupied with anything but the fact that he and Hannibal will be alone in the room again, and how much he wants that to happen.

He is just setting the water running to wash the dishes when Hannibal returns on quiet feet.

"I wanted to save you the trouble," Will starts. "You made dinner so -"

The rest is swallowed by warm lips, familiar lips, soft against Will's own and relentless, desperate and needy as Will had been for days, just as hungry for it as he was.

He turns enough to catch himself against the counter, hands splaying wide across the cold granite as a helpless sound escapes Will's throat. A scrabbling, desperate, to push himself upright again, but his hands slide out from under him as Hannibal bends him nearly backwards over the counter, until their mouths part with a gasp and he drags his lips to Will's

neck, sucking the soft skin enough to pull another whimper from the hapless dog trainer all but collapsed to his knees beneath him.

"Hannibal - "

The man answers with a hum but doesn't slow, broad hands rubbing firm up Will's ribs, sliding across soft flannel to his back. Will yelps a little as he's lifted, Winston echoes the sound with a bark, and entirely overcome, he laughs.

It is half a sigh, half an exclamation, hand pressed to his own face in the instant afforded him to catch his bearings.

"I swore," Will begins, "not again."

"Then I will stop," Hannibal answers readily, hands on either side of Will's thighs, leaning up towards where he sits tall atop the counter. "Say the word and I will."

"It's unprofessional," pleads Will, watching as his hands raise to frame Hannibal's face, unfairly handsome with the carved cheeks that feel so soft beneath his thumbs.

"Say the word."

"Hannibal, I - you're my client -"

"Say the word."

Will swallows hard, and presses their foreheads together, eyes closed.

"It's a conflict of interest -"

"Then I will sto-"

"Don't you fucking dare," breathes Will.

It’s fumbling and hot and quick, now, Hannibal pressing closer to kiss Will again before he succumbs to the soft fingers in his hair, the gentle touches, and ducks his head to press his lips lower, to Will’s neck down to his chest through the warm fabric. Worshipful, nearly, and Will can feel how fast his heart is beating against his ribs, how quick his breath comes, and it’s intoxicating to think that he did this, him alone.

The *thought* of him.

Hannibal’s palms slide warm over Will’s thighs and he raises his head again, eyes dark and entirely focused on the man above him. He leans up to kiss the side of Will’s neck gently, just under his jaw, and hums softly.

“You have been a very pleasant center of my thoughts.”

"Center?" Will breathes, another laugh, almost frantic as he pushes his hands along Hannibal's cheeks, slips his fingers through the soft strands of his hair. "You mean you've

thought of anything else besides this?"

The kiss closes fierce and Will meets it readily, back arching wanton under the steady pressure of Hannibal's hands as they slip higher.

"Lucky you."

A quick tug slides Will closer to the edge of the counter, closer to Hannibal, close enough that the length of their bodies press fast together. He throws his arms around Hannibal's neck to stop from feeling as though he's going to slip off the counter, another desperate laugh sighed between their mouths before he closes his own softly against Hannibal's. Lips press, simply, sweetly, arms sinking deeper to keep the man near him, fingers twisting to ruffle his hair, kisses gliding soft against the other.

It is an extraordinary loss of autonomy, the desperate rationality of every day since the last time he tasted this man's mouth against his own falling forgotten beneath each small sound that rises between them. Propriety, professionalism, every other damn excuse he gave to Bev hardly matters in compare to the satisfaction of this need, a more primal and pure thing than any other contrivance. Will's body curves rising towards Hannibal, and as they pant against each other, noses brushing softly, he wishes he could tell him just how deep the ache goes that is so profoundly fulfilled by this.

By him.

"Fuck, I missed you."

That'll do.

Another hum, pleased and warm and highly amused and Hannibal brushes their lips together before slipping his hands beneath Will’s thighs and stepping back, holding him close and up against himself, delighting in the way Will tenses in surprise against him, clings closer, kisses deeper.

He is tired, he is so tired. Study and interning and taking on a heavier burden than anyone should, at home. He is exhausted and spread thin, and this, Will, shivering and pliant in his arms, brings him to life like few things have in a long time.

“I have thought of very little besides this,” Hannibal confides, takes the few steps necessary to pin Will to a wall and step closer so he can rub their hips together in a slow deliberate roll.

“Thought of how I could convince you to stay after dinner.” Another kiss, lower, tilting Wills head back and slipping a hand up to catch his hair to hold him there. “Went through arguments in my head, found ways to win them. And then you never made any.”

The laugh is warm against him, and Hannibal tilts his head to look at Will again.

Will blushes and tucks his head towards Hannibal's neck, kissing beneath his jaw since he's there already, following that beautiful curve of bone even as Will huffs against it.

"It's unprofessional," he insists again.

A smile curves against Will's cheek, another languid roll of hips that serves as proof enough, really.

"You are not here under the auspices of your work now," Hannibal responds. "You are not on the clock, and I am not paying you to be here at this time."

Will bites his lip, lifts his eyes to follow the contours of Hannibal's face, down to the lips that Will finds himself drawn to again, to taste the soft sounds the man makes because of him.

"I'm not here for you."

"No," Hannibal agrees. "You do not visit for me, nor is your purpose here to see me. But what a happy accident that you are here, already, and have time to see me as well."

At this Will nearly laughs, nearly gasps as friction between their joined hips sends a delightful shudder to coil tight in his belly.

"Conflict of interest?" Will offers weakly, and at this, Hannibal finally grins.

"I am not the one who requires you for therapy, Mr. Graham."

Will hesitates, blinking wide, and finally leans back just enough to meet Hannibal eye-to-eye.

"Aren't you?"

A blink in return, slow, careful, before Hannibal leans in to kiss Will again, and this kiss is a reassurance, far softer than what their current activity warrants and Will shivers with it.

“No,” he responds, honest, quiet, nuzzling against Will again as the other sighs out heavily against him when Hannibal brings his hand to stroke Will up between them.

“I very much enjoy your company,” Hannibal continues. “I very much respect the work that you do.” He turns his hand and against him, Will’s legs shake as he moans, “And although I would be more than happy in having your companionship it would be by mutual agreement only.”

Another gasp, another shudder, and Will’s arms wrap securely around Hannibal even as the other pulls back to smile at him.

“Shall I stop?” he asks again, soft, hair a mess and eyes hooded, and Will can see the bare traces of color in his cheeks and it’s mesmerizing.

The word rings in his ears - *companionship*. Will has companions, he reminds himself, he has his dogs and he has Bev.

But for as much as they mean to him, as much as he needs them and has them to keep him afloat, none of it compares to this rush of excitement, the thrill of such intimacy, held with such easy strength against the wall by this man who has so entirely invaded his thoughts since the last time they were so near.

Will catches his bottom lip between his teeth, holds it there and traces his fingers across the pale rose blooming over Hannibal's cheeks, down the bridge of his nose to follow the soft curves of his lips. They part for him with a sigh that Will feels himself release in kind.

He shakes his head, and his eyes widen beneath the hair that falls into his face.

"No. Don't stop."

The walls crumble as their mouths meet and Hannibal presses him back, pins him and rubs against his hand, between their legs, caught between the hardness in Will's pants and Hannibal's own. A fluid movement of bodies, crushed together ecstatic and breathless, nearly slipping to the floor in raw heat and lust and affection. And it is, that, in the little sounds that escape from Will, in the brief opening of Hannibal's eyes to take in the torrid flush in Will's lips.

Will loops his arms around Hannibal's neck and clings to him, fingers pushing up into his hair, and sighs, laughing.

"We made it through dinner, at least."

"Good." A sigh between them and Hannibal ducks his head to watch as his hand works the button and fly on Will's pants and the other wriggles with nervous anticipation.

Just like before, just as quick and needy, desperate and horny together, and Hannibal considers that since he wants this again, wants Will, wants them together, perhaps they should slow down and act like adults. Mature, proper adults as both their work positions suggested.

But then Will moans in his ear, a breathy and warm noise, and Hannibal's hands tremble a little, his head turns so he can nuzzle against the man in his arms, heavy and solid and alive and *willing*.

Maybe to the bedroom, this time, or the couch again, Will considers, much as he can consider anything with Hannibal's mouth a welcome heat against his throat, anything beyond the fingers that press against his tented shorts and form the worn fabric against the curve of his cock.

"We should," Will pants, "we should..."

Entirely in Hannibal's grasp, only able to rock his hips against the searching fingers that grind firm against him, Will rests his head back against the wall, neck bared.

"...somewhere..."

"Yes," Hannibal agrees, "upstairs, perhaps -"

He lowers Will, carefully as he can, untwisting his hand from Will's pants to lower him but the floor isn't where Will expects it to be, and he casts his feet out a little far. A laugh, sudden and bright, as he slides to sit on the floor and he tugs Hannibal's tie to bend the man over him,

laying back beneath him, and tilting his head to bring the man's mouth to his throat with another sigh of laughter.

"Or here," grins Will. "Here works too."

So young, so alive, so unlike anything Hannibal has allowed himself to experience in such a long time. No partners, no lovers, not for many years, taking care of Mischa took over his entire being and his entire self, and this… this makes him feel like he can breathe.

He goes without hesitation, kissing hot against Will's throat, down to his neck, fingers working to bare him one button of his soft flannel shirt at a time. To his lips, to his tongue, teeth, breath, until the other is shivering above him, arching up and twisting, fingers in Hannibal's hair and over his shoulders and back.

It's frantic and youthful and hilarious, and Hannibal casts his eyes up to catch Will's, then just past him to catch Winston's sitting obediently by the table with his head tilted, confused but not worried enough for his master to move. Hannibal makes a sound, a laugh, and ducks his head against Will's skin again, fingers quick to work the opening of his pants wider, the waistband of his boxers down, and lips quick around the head before Will can realize where this is going and complain.

Will's stomach twists up into his throat, a high groan peeling from his lips as his back lifts from the floor. Bent onto his shoulders, socked feet shoving against the floor to keep himself from falling, Will's eyes roll back and his hips roll upward to seek the smooth heat that wraps around him.

"Hannibal," he begs, but the protest weakens in his throat as Hannibal's hand wraps around where his lips don't yet reach, humming his response and sending a shiver curling up the length of Will's spine. A foot slips out from under him and he jerks it back into place, and another laugh startles out of him.

Anything he could say right now wouldn't matter, that Hannibal doesn't have to do this, that Will doesn't need him to (and that, a lie, really), that Will didn't mean for this to happen and really just wanted to -

Hannibal's tongue, diving against the salty slit at the tip of his cock, turns Will's thoughts into a dial tone.

It was all excuses anyway.

He sinks his fingers through Hannibal's hair, determined, then, to enjoy this utterly, even sprawled against the cold kitchen floor. The contact, the intimacy, the company that he enjoyed so sincerely before it even came to this, and this certainly not lacking in any degree of enjoyment beyond that.

"Please," Will begs, and their eyes meet for a breathless instant. "Please don't stop."

So Hannibal takes him deeper, lips parting wide, tongue spreading to rub against the thick vein on the underside of Will's cock until the other is shaking beneath him, biting back the

delicious needy sounds Hannibal wishes he could let free.

He draws his teeth over the sensitive skin, just light scrapes to feel Will jerk, shudder, whisper Hannibal’s name and swallow is on the next breath just as readily.

It is intoxicating holding Will so, on edge and pleased and trembling for more. His fingers slip from their grip in Hannibal’s hair and trace his jaw instead, spread warm over his cheek, up just under his eye. Around him, Will’s thighs struggle to spread further in his pants and Hannibal’s back bends in a pleasing warm curve as he imagines spreading the man entirely bare in his bed, taking him in, savoring him…

He moans, and Will makes a helpless, high little sound that tugs Hannibal’s eyes to narrow in a grin.

Will shoves a shaking hand back through his hair, dropping back against the floor to let loose even the movements of his body, the tension that pulled ripcord tight up through him to feel this, disallowed to himself for so long but for the rare meaningless night spent with men whose faces he can't recall and whose names he hadn't bothered to remember past getting buzzed into an apartment.

"I have dreamed of your mouth," Will groans low as Hannibal spreads his hand down through the dense hair curled around the base of his length, the rest of it taken whole into Hannibal's mouth. "Dreamed of you."

The words fall in whispers, unrestrained as the tension unwinds from his breath, his voice, into ready gasps and little moans stifled behind his own hand, to keep himself from crying out as eagerly as he would were they not in the kitchen, still, on the floor, with food cooling on the table nearby.

"All week," he breathes, chest rising in quickened gasps as Hannibal's teeth tug against him again, as sure fingers slip lower the soft skin to taste the head of his cock, slick and hot. It nearly undoes him entirely, laughing shuddering, and he presses his hand against his eyes, peeking from beneath it to watch the man, this man, Hannibal bent low over him. "All week I thought about you."

A gasp as Hannibal's cheeks hollow, amusement in his eyes, and Will lets his eyes roll closed.

"Harder."

Hannibal shivers, Will’s voice so low and warm and trembling, unexpected and wonderful that he would be someone who would enjoy talking through sex, and Hannibal finds he adores it.

And is all too happy to oblige and feel Will tense beneath him.

He tastes good, masculine and musky and warm, and Hannibal takes great pleasure in pulling back to tease the slit until Will is almost sobbing before taking him deep to suck again.

“God, Hannibal, please… fuck…”

Fingers slip further, just behind Will's balls, rubbing soft against the silky skin there until Will bucks, feet scrabbling on the floor, toes curling. So Hannibal does it again.

"No… God… yes… oh."

It's beautiful, like watching Will entirely unravel beneath Hannibal's seeking mouth and talented fingers, flushed and beautiful and half-clothed, splayed on Hannibal's kitchen floor like an offering. He is beautiful, Hannibal cannot get enough of him.

He hums.

Will whimpers and draws his knees up with a soft plea.

An attempt to relieve himself of the the strains of such sustained, delicious pleasure, the movement only serves to spread him more beneath Hannibal's seeking fingers. They rub, slow circles, enough to send Will onto his shoulders, his breath silenced on a gasp.

"Yes," Will begs, his voice high and wavering, held tight in his throat. "Yes, please."

His tongue parts his lips, chest heaving pale beneath his open shirt.

"Inside me, please," he whimpers. "I want you in me."

He's always had a filthy mouth, pushing the moans that would otherwise rip from his throat through into words instead. Eager exultations, crude proclamations, he's never been able to restrain it and has found that with few exceptions, his lovers have always been pleasantly surprised to find such a raw tongue unleashed from such a sweet mouth.

A grin, crooked and flushed, to discover that Hannibal is just as charmed. A blissful sense of abandon, twining through raised hips and clenched toes and fingers that tighten through soft straight strands of hair.

"Please?" Sighing, soft. "Please, Hannibal."

It's hard to resist him, hard to pull back all intent and remind himself that his sister is upstairs, and that if - when, definitely when - he has Will Graham beneath him properly it will be in bed and it will be memorable, not on the kitchen floor after dinner. But the pleas slip under his skin and send him shivering before he pulls from Will with a hum and breathes against him.

For a moment neither move before Hannibal flicks his eyes up, feels his lips tilt into a grin and brings his hand to his lips to wet two fingers, sucking slow, pulling them deliberate through his lips as he had Will's cock not seconds before. He takes his time, slow, soft, until his fingers are fully slick, and then he leans over Will and keeps his eyes on him as he pulls his fingers free and leans to kiss Will instead.

"God, you've got a mouth on you," he whispers, grinning, circling Will's hole before gently pressing the tip of one finger in, delighting in the tension, the gasp, the pleasure it draws warm and bright through Will's features.

“Be patient,” he breathes, pressing further, deeper, feeling Will unfurl for him like a cat in the sun, pleased and pliant and so, so close.

Will's lips brush warm against Hannibal's ear, parted only for him on a gentle sigh.

"Wait until you feel my mouth on you," he murmurs.

And he uncoils beneath the press of Hannibal's touch inside of him, back bowed and cheek pressed to Hannibal's own. Soft fingers twist through tousled hair, keep Hannibal close atop him, to feel the exchange of breath between them, hearts and lungs and pulses expanding in unison. Will releases a little sound, a wordless plea, and draws his knee slow alongside the man's hip, wrapping it over him, close, close, a contact longed for in lonely nights, a nearness needed by both, a relief, desired and driven, one towards the other.

"More," Will whispers. "Don't stop."

Burdens bared, shown, and shared. Bodies bent to meet the other. The expansion and retraction, each in turn.

"I need you." A confession, aired. "More." A plea, exhaled.

Addicting. His words, his breath, the heat of Will against him, Hannibal is dizzy with it, with his own need, his own coiling aching desire to just take... he adds a second finger, hushes gently when Will wriggles to adjust, the friction just barely comfortable without proper lube.

He seeks, careful and clever, and finds what he wants when Will draws a deep quick breath and holds it, body coiling, twisting, needing, before he exhales a whimper and bites his lip.

"God, there, yes, there, Hannibal..."

Muscles twitch and stretch, warm and pleasant and tense and lovely as Hannibal works his fingers harder, deeper, to feel Will buck up against the feeling.

"More -"

Hannibal kisses him, working a quick deliberate massage over the sensitive nub until Will keens, a hand up to press to his eyes as he bites his lip hard and his entire body nearly vibrates with pleasure.

"Hannibal..."

A rare enough thing, to remember name of the rare person Will has allowed to touch him in such a way.

"Hannibal, please..."

A rarer thing still to already plan, in the peals of passion that part his lips, when next they'll meet again.

"Hannibal, I -"

To imagine and crave the man inside him, to not just take the release offered as a perfunctory moment of relief, and rather want more, more, to envision him tensing with the same shudders of unbound pleasure as he draws from Will now with every careful caress and hushed sigh against his skin.

Will wraps his arms around Hannibal's neck, his leg around his hips, mindless of the place or the time or anything but this moment, shared open and wanting, as Will tenses, coils, firms, and with a gasp that pulls every stitch of air from burning lungs, spills fast and heady, pulses of heat in time with the movement of their bodies. Again and again, his body bucking outside of his control, relinquished fierce and feverish, until slowly, fading, Will lapses into a languid puddle against the floor.

He groans and stretches, and tugs Hannibal into a clumsy kiss.

Hannibal laughs, soft and warm and gentle, pulling his hand free to rest it against the floor, as he allows Will's unabashed pleasure to wash over him, to fuel and feed his own even when he does nothing to relieve it. It doesn't matter, it can wait. He can wait. Hold Will in his arms as the other catches his breath and twists languidly beneath him - entirely pliant.

"Mischa's German lessons finish at 7, on Thursday," he breathes, grinning, incorrigible for a moment, mischievous and hungry. He looks younger.

"Will you come by then?"

"For her?" Will breathes, turning his nose against Hannibal's cheek. "Or for you?"

He kisses there, his temple, his hair, back down to the corner of his mouth. Keeping hold of Hannibal's hair, he slides the other hand along his back, and sighs relief beneath the weight of him, only distantly aware of how much his shoulder will ache tomorrow from being against the unyielding floor for so damn long.

"Both?" Will asks. The note of hope plucks sweet in his voice, a want that warms like the blush through his cheeks, spreading down across his chest, whole and genuine. They are lovely, both of them, the home they've built together and invited him into so willingly. Her with her clever eyes and sneaky grin, Hannibal with his warm hands and warmer heart, both full of love and need alike, and Will, at least in this moment, aching to be a part of it all.

"You came for Mischa today," Hannibal tells him softly. "On Thursday I will selfishly ask you to come for me."

He leans gently against Will, soft and warm now that the passion's spent for the time, and he smiles.

"Dinner if you wish it, company if not. A guarantee of an empty house." He pushes up to look at Will better, tilts his head.

The heat is caught between them, in the wrinkles of rumpled clothes and tender hands, in lips that brush against each other as they speak without even the need to kiss. But Will feels the

cold pressing in against him, from the floor on which they are sprawled, the air that settles against their skin, and before he lets it chill him, he nods.

Eagerly.

"Yes," he agrees, and steals a kiss now, to stir the embers that simmer slowly between them. "I'll feed the dogs before I come over."

Will clutches along the expanse of Hannibal's back, to bring himself near so much as to keep Hannibal close.

"Company will be more than enough."

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

"Is Mischa here?"

"No," Hannibal replies, "she's at German le-"

Will's whole body collides with his, hands pushing up into his hair to tug him lower for a kiss, teeth and tongue and lips and moans, already, the sound of tension releasing merely to be near Hannibal again, in this house, with him like this.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Will Graham has quite a mouth on him ;)

4PM and Hannibal's hands are tight against the wheel as he drives.

It's raining, a stupid out of season day to all the good weather they've been having and he wonders if that's a sign. If perhaps it was inappropriate to invite Will over. Perhaps he should write to him to not come at all. Or rather to come another day. For Mischa. For training. For his job.

He pulls into the garage and it takes him moments before he turns the wipers off, the screeching against dry glass finally penetrating the fog in his mind, pushes him to move.

Inside, he frets. Will had said 4:30, when he finished work, maybe a few moments after in case traffic was inhospitable. Maybe he should make an early dinner, something light so they can --

-- ignore it and leave it to cool on the table as they had every other dinner.

Perhaps wine, then.

Or water.

Or… something. Anything.

4:23PM and Hannibal's hands are tight in his hair now as he paces, socked feet silent on the floor.

He has been thinking of Will since he'd gone, since before then. Of his hands and his voice, his soft breathing. He takes over his mind in a way Hannibal cannot describe. He is the softest addiction, the sweetest sensation. He smiles. Then he smiles wider.

He doesn't check his watch, but he doesn't stop pacing either.

4:32PM.

Taking the day off had been a massive mistake for Will. Beverly assured him again and again that she could handle the rescue on her own and insisted that he take the day off to "get ready" - in what way, Will cringed to think - but rather than make the most of it, Will had simply resigned to spend the day in relative uselessness. Sure, he had taken the dogs out for a long walk, wandered through the woods, read a little in the kitchen when the table caught the afternoon light, but rarely had his thoughts strayed from Hannibal and he did far more *pining* than he was prepared to admit.

Hannibal with his sweeps of hair and devastatingly dark eyes. With his wide shoulders and his strong, capable hands. With his warmth and affection and the curious sadness underlying it all.

Will sighs. He could choke on his own poetry, half-hard at the thought of this man who has so taken him over, and Bev's relentless text messages for Will to *visualize that he is a tree, and you are climbing him.*

She knew once she sent that he'd have no choice but to imagine it, and Will glances down to his pants where the seatbelt rests, too tight against his cock. Biting his lip, he rests his head back against the seat of the parked car, silent in Hannibal's driveway and tries to will it away.

It works as well as it ever does, which is to say, it doesn't. The moment Will closes his eyes he sees Hannibal there, curled over him across the kitchen floor, kissing beneath his jaw, eyes dancing amusement at Will's insatiable need to talk dirty, fingers inside him, deeper, wider...

"Fuck," hisses Will. "Fuck this."

Jerking the seatbelt free, he twists to pull his phone from his pocket and sends Bev a single text:

seeking new employment as a lumberjack

The phone is tossed to the passenger seat, and Will exits the car, already five minutes late and alone, this time, Winston at home with the others. Quick strides close the distance to the door that opens for him before he even has a chance to knock.

Their eyes meet, and lips part in surprise.

"I heard the car door close."

"Is Mischa here?"

"No," Hannibal replies, "she's at German le-"

Will's whole body collides with his, hands pushing up into his hair to tug him lower for a kiss, teeth and tongue and lips and moans, already, the sound of tension releasing merely to be near Hannibal again, in this house, with him like this.

"I fucking missed you," sighs Will, before pushing Hannibal back into the house with another rough kiss.

And there is no resistance here, just a brief fumbling to close the door before either topple through it again in their fervor before Hannibal's hands are in Will's hair and he holds him so close it's hard to breathe.

"I fucking missed you too," comes the pleased reply, and perhaps it's the profanity riding on those lips, perhaps his tone or just the way his accent curls, but it has Will whimpering, pressing closer, pulling closer, before ducking his head to laugh, run his lips against Hannibal's throat.

Hannibal can feel his heart hammer, so long it felt like without Will here, when it had been merely past a day. He is giddy with it, dizzy with it, and he does not at all discourage the wandering hands and seeking fingers.

"Perhaps," a kiss, "this time," a gasp, neck arched, lips parted, "bed?"

Laughing against Hannibal's throat where he has already sucked a mark, Will murmurs, "Yes, please. My back couldn't take the floor again."

He slips his arms around Hannibal's neck, so tight that his hands are on his own elbows, and Hannibal's brown lifts in anticipation, ready to catch Will as soon as he tugs himself up around him. Legs around Hannibal's lean waist, cock already hard between them, he kisses Hannibal with soft, eager little flutters of lips so that he can carry him.

"You've been okay?" Will asks, pressing his forehead against Hannibal's to kiss him again before he can answer.

"Quite - ah," Hannibal responds, finding the stairs with his toe and then scaling them slowly, distracted thoroughly by the squirming young man held in his arms. "Quite a lot better now that you're here."

A shiver plucks across Will's skin, despite the fact that he's still wearing his coat, and he loosens an arm to press his fingers to Hannibal's cheek instead and kiss him, grinning.

Hannibal turns to rest his weight against the banister and kisses back, lost entirely to the sensation, allowing himself to be overwhelmed, to drown in Will against him. Only another soft laugh forces him to motion again and he does not stop until they reach the door to his room.

"And you?" he whispers, tilting his body just enough to push the handle with his elbow and set the door swinging open behind himself.

"Busy," comes the honest reply, "and very happy to be here. Again. For this." Words punctuated by kisses as Hannibal kicks the door closed with socked feet and walks over to lower Will into the bed.

He keeps his eyes barely open, seeking Will’s lips, his cheeks, his fingertips with his own, a lazy exploration of the young man beneath him in bed.

His bed.

In his bedroom.

Hannibal makes a soft sound and crawls over him to push Will down against the bed, hands framing his face, stroking hair from his forehead as they kiss.

He hums, delighted, when Will turns them, weight against Hannibal’s side, until he straddles the man and pins him to bed in turn.

The kissing lasts longer, longer still, hands pressed eager against each other's cheeks, until finally Will pushes himself away with a crooked grin, the bridge of his nose flooding scarlet across his cheeks. He turns his hips a little, still entirely too clothed, to rub against the man beneath him and slides his hands down to Hannibal's chest.

"How much did you miss me?" asks Will, a little lilt to his voice, a hint of the honey that dripped from his lips and formed into eager, unshy words against the kitchen floor. He begins to work the buttons free of Hannibal’s shirt, no hesitation, no concern for what this may or may not be, no concern they will be found out by his sister or stared at by their dogs, although Will found that last time, they were that, and with no small degree of puzzlement.

Warm hands and elegant fingers skim across Hannibal's stomach, sliding the neat button-down from his shoulders and leaning low to tug it from his arms. "Tell me," he continues softly. "Did you think about me?"

Although his shyness is betrayed by the bright blush burning across his cheeks, he bites his lip and watches Hannibal guilelessly, nuzzled up against his cheek, hips rolling slow deep circles. He slips his fingers beneath the hem of Hannibal's undershirt, and begins to slip that up as well.

"Did you think about this?"

Breathless, Hannibal wonders if Will could answer his own questions, can read the pleasure on Hannibal’s expression and *know*.

"I thought I had memorized the feeling of your fingers on my skin, but I'm learning it all anew," he tells him softly, accent stronger when he’s so touched, so caressed and smitten. He arches up and bends so Will can work the shirt from his body before framing Will’s hips with broad hands and kissing him again.

"I have thought of you every waking moment and dreamed of no one else,” he murmurs, voice lower, darker as he smiles and feels Will breathe a soft laugh against his skin. He

moves to work the buttons on Will’s shirt but finds his hands stopped, splayed, as Will lays over him again and kisses him into pliancy against the sheets.

"Stay,” Will breathes, and Hannibal watches, mesmerized, as Will sits back up, hands slow to work the buttons on his own shirt, hips rolling in delightfully slow undulations against Hannibal until he groans from the friction.

A beautiful man, blushing torrid yet so confident as he tosses his shirt to the floor, spreads his knees wider around Hannibal and slinks against him, skin to skin.

Will has always enjoyed sex - the rush of his own pleasure overriding worry, the sensation of sharing that release with someone else and feeling their delight echo back through him. But it's been years since he's let himself be so free with someone that - he admits grudgingly now as Hannibal murmurs foreign words against his mouth in a low groan - he might actually care about beyond the physical.

Hell, it's been years since he's cared about someone in this way at all, always quick to curb it and run in those few instances where it might have developed.

Will's fingers lace through Hannibal's, holding them pinned above his head as he pulls his hips down to bring their friction together and find heat instead. Soft hair curls against Will's chest and he grins a little at the tickling sensation, dipping his head to kiss Hannibal's collarbone and suck a pale mark against it.

"I've been aching to feel you inside of me again," Will sighs, punctuating his words with another curl of his spine that drives their hips together. "To feel stretched and full and heavy with you."

He is almost a different person here, open to Hannibal's desires, his own, wanton and desirous and entirely aware of his own loveliness. Or maybe like this, in these rare moments afforded, Will is more himself than he daily allows himself to be.

Releasing Hannibal's hands, his fingers spread and he slides his body lower, so that he's sitting across the man's legs instead. Cheek turned against Hannibal's chest hair, Will kisses his way lower through the dark fluff, hands following the path his mouth is making, until he reaches the fly of his pants and bites softly at Hannibal's stomach.

"Can I taste you first?" Will asks, almost sweetly, biting his lower lip between his teeth and turning his eyes upward as he nuzzles against the thicker patch of hair just beneath Hannibal's fly.

A confidence Hannibal envies, already adores, Will entirely in control here and Hannibal all too happy to yield that to him. He watches, eyes hooded and lips parted on a smile as Will’s hands slips past where his lips rest, move to slowly work his pants undone, the heel of his hand rubbing deliberately over the bulge there.

"Please.” Whether acquiescence or a plea it is hard to tell, and hardly matters, and Hannibal allows himself to arch, head back and eyes briefly closed in utter pleasure as he feels Will bare him further. He pulls the pants open wider, taking his time to nuzzle against the smooth

silk of Hannibal's boxers, laughing softly at the texture, rolling his own hips down against air simply for the motion.

Hannibal lifts his hips, enough to feel Will pull his pants lower, his boxers too, bites his own lip at the feeling of cool breath against his cock, already hard and curved upwards against his stomach.

It has been a long time since Hannibal had let someone close as well, too long since he has had the chance to catch fleeting passionate kisses, longer still since he had last felt himself bared, his knees spread and bent to be held so vulnerable.

He makes a sound, like a laugh but lower, and ducks his head to watch Will again, to see him there, between his legs, so hungry and horny and vibrating with energy.

"I have ached for you," he murmurs, watches Will's lips split on a grin, feels his own mirror.

"Ache a little longer," Will murmurs, amusement tugging up beneath his eyes as he grasps Hannibal's length and guides it to his lips. Slow kisses, mouth curving around the tip, the soft tip of velvety skin sucked gently before it's slid back with careful fingers, revealing flushed heat, pressed past Will's humming lips. His tongue curls around it, eyes fluttering nearly closed, sky-blue edged out by widened pupils as he watches Hannibal's cheeks darken dusky rose above him.

Salt and sweat slick against his tongue, Will's body arches into another curl, tented hard within his pants, hips rolling in a gentle motion before he slips his mouth free of Hannibal's cock with a pop and a sigh, cooling quick against his damp length.

"God, Hannibal."

It's a careful dance between them, to give experience and take response, and Will watches eagerly up the length of Hannibal's body - all soft hair and hard muscles - for answers to the questions he poses to Hannibal's body with his own. Without using his hands - instead raking his nails down the inside of the man's thighs - he uses his tongue and shifts his body to take Hannibal back into his mouth, swallowing him deeper with a long, hard suck.

"Fuck."

It's exhaled, slow and low and followed by a groan of need, and Hannibal spreads his thighs wider to avoid rocking his hips up against the heat surrounding him, intoxicating and delicious. It's a slow torment, a slow sucking and deliberate tease. Hannibal sighs when he can avoid panting, bites his lip to avoid the moans that inevitably seek to escape his lips.

It feels incredible.

"Don't make me ache long, I can't," he admits, teeth gritted and lips parted on a smile as Will hums and shivers claw their way through Hannibal's skin. "Will, please."

"Please?" Will echoes, bemusement escalating with the deviousness of his grin. His tongue parts his lips, a gesture that earns him a shiver from the man whose cock is so close to his

mouth, and Will gives another long, moaning suck from as deep as he can take him, slowly upwards, his tongue following the curve of vein pulsing there, up to the tip where he peels Hannibal away with a thin line of saliva that he wipes away with quick fingers and a convincingly shy little blink.

It vanishes just as quickly as it appeared.

"Please what?" he muses, pushing off from Hannibal's thighs up onto his knees, to peel his own jeans free from his hips, slipping them lower with his thumbs. He catches his boxers along with, and the fierce blush spreads down from his cheeks to his neck, his chest, rosy and warm as his cock springs free.

A soft, winsome sort of smile across his lips, he slinks forward on slow hands to straddle Hannibal - peeling off his jeans and kicking them behind as he goes - until he is across his hips, legs squeezed on either side of him.

With a moan that spills from his lips, head bowed forward, Will rocks once to feel their lengths brush together, and his fingernails dig gently into Hannibal's belly.

"Tell me what you want, Hannibal."

“You,” comes the honest reply, breathless, and Hannibal brings his hands up to frame Will’s face before he kisses him.

He feels giddy, like a teenager with a first crush, touching and playing and experimenting together and he cannot get enough. He kisses Will’s lips, his teeth when he smiles too wide to catch those, across his cheek and down under his jaw. Hannibal kisses Will like he wants to kiss no one else.

It’s playful, youthful, both fumbling to position themselves comfortably and both happy to laugh off positioning errors and slipped hands. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter because when they fit together it’s perfect, and Hannibal is smiling against Will’s cheek, head turned just barely to the side to share his breath and feel the way he rocks his hips after against Hannibal’s own, drawing gasps and friction and pleasure for them both.

Without a word, Hannibal reaches back, fingers just short of catching the handle of the top drawer of his bedside table, and laughing when Will reaches for him and pulls it open.

“At the back,” he murmurs, kissing Will’s cheek again.

Will watches him for a moment more, spread across Hannibal's chest, bare bodies pressed together with a guileless, youthful joy, and he grins.

"You're beautiful," he says in passing, kissing any skin he can reach - cheek, neck, shoulder - as he leans to snare the condoms, the little bottle of lube from the drawer. Settling back heavy on Hannibal's stomach, hair in his face, he purses his lips and regards the box for a moment, before picking it open with a fingernail.

"Looks like we've been in the same boat," Will notes, rueful, but no less pleased for it, really. It makes it a little sweeter, adds something to their exuberance to know that Hannibal has been just as much in a drought as Will, and in all likelihood, one of choice and selectiveness rather than force.

Or perhaps a bit of both.

Hannibal feels his cheeks color and says nothing for the moment, eyes up as though to avoid seeing Will as he sits astride him, fingers fumbling and impatient as he shivers with the need to wait.

"Fucking finally," swears Will when he finally wrangles a condom free, tossing the box aside and peeling the packet open with his teeth and a coy grin. "You first."

He fits the rubber between his fingers and arches, cock hard and pink against Hannibal's belly, and catches the man's length instead. Careful fingers slip it down over him, and for a moment Will is inordinately pleased - and relieved - that he can still do it at all, let alone without looking.

"God," he sighs, uncapping the lube and drizzling it, slicking it with his fingers first along Hannibal, then against himself. "I have been waiting for this. For you. Like this." Another little sound as he frees his fingers from himself and presses his hands back against Hannibal's stomach, back arching. "Put it in me?"

“Demanding,” Hannibal laughs, words soft, eyes darting to look anywhere but at Will’s own as he feels the other shift above him, duck his head and adjust his position, hips up, lips wet and hot against Hannibal’s cheek, just under his eye.

It’s slow, deliberate, a careful preparation due as much to lack of practice recently as the need to be softer, gentle, but Hannibal groans, eyes closing, as he feels Will tight around him, the push slow to begin but enough to send them both to trembling and soft laughter.

“You have been a most welcome distraction,” Hannibal tells him, smiling wider and parting his lips when Will tries to kiss him, the two of them caught in a gentle exchange where they simply brush, but rarely touch.

“Oh, Will.”

They hold there, for a moment, merely feeling the pulse and heartbeat of the other, bodies joined, breath tangled where their parted lips meet but don't yet close together.

"I hope I continue to be," Will whispers, more shy about this admission than any of the physical need and want shared between them. He stops any response with a lingering kiss, and rolls his hips forward, shuddering with a pleasure that curls his fingers and his toes.

Dipping his head, Will's hair falls soft across Hannibal's face, cheeks pressed warmly together as Will rocks steadily, slowly. A flicker of tension draws in his brows, brings his lower lip between his teeth again, but he doesn't stop. The sweetest pain, spiraling up his spine in waves.

"Christ, you're big," gasps Will, a rough edge to his voice. "Since Tuesday, I've missed you being inside me, your fingers, your - ah," Will sighs, and the sound shifts to a low groan as he pushes himself upright. Back bent, he tosses his hair back from his face and sinks his hips down over Hannibal's delicious length. "This is so much fucking better."

Hannibal sets his hands against Will's hips and just holds there, buried so deep and trying to catch his breath as the young man above him watches, flushed and spread and perfect.

"You are breathtaking," he tells him, the same reverence as Will had used to declare Hannibal beautiful to him, entirely honest, entirely present. He doesn't move, doesn't push Will to take more than he can, doesn't make him move until he wants to on his own. Exquisite torment, and a beautiful view.

And then Will grins, wider, and shifts, Hannibal's hands slipping to his thighs to feel the muscles tense and stretch as he lifts himself to kneel and sinks back down, leaving them both entirely breathless, wide-eyed and trembling.

"Fuck."

Will spreads his shaking fingers up through the hair on Hannibal's chest, head dipped as he lets loose a low groan of relief. They drag slowly, nails leaving pale pink lines in their wake, as Will rises onto his knees and lowers again, turning his hips just a little before repeating the movement.

"You feel so fucking good inside me," he breathes, teeth clenched against the stretch of his body around Hannibal, so tight it aches to take him so deeply, drives the breath from him when he feels the pull of his own body in response to Hannibal's motionless push. "I'm going to ride you until I cum."

The declaration of intent is moaned loud as Will tosses his head back again and settles into a faster rhythm, He slides his fingers across Hannibal's mouth, watching the man's eyes darken as he kisses them, shivering when Hannibal's hands slide higher up his thighs to grasp his hips. He doesn't control Will, move or shift him, but simply follows his movement as Will sets the pace, breath hitching on little sounds of pleasure as his eyes settle on Hannibal's face.

"You're amazing. It's so good - it's - ah," Will gasps again. "Full and stretched with you, fuck, Hannibal. Hard. I want it hard."

If Hannibal had ever needed undeniable proof that he enjoyed someone talking through sex, or someone talking so crudely through it, this is it. His entire body is alive with Will's words, hot and shivering and tight as Will starts to make good on his promise.

He finds that he has nothing he can say, nothing that would run eloquent, nothing that would sound nearly as delicious as what Will says and how he says it. Hannibal is not one to waste words, not one to throw them around, and here he is more than happy to just let them flow over his skin as he hisses at the sharp bite of nails over his chest, turns his own fingers to push the same feeling against Will, a feedback loop.

Above him, Will moves with entirely too much grace, hair tossed messy over his eyes, lips parted red with sighs or more depraved words and Hannibal cannot get enough of him.

He clings to Will and holds him still as he pushes up, just once, deep enough to send Will arching back hard, shaking, legs spreading wider and his cock leaking clear down against where they join.

“Faster,” Hannibal breathes, and whether it’s a command or a desire it’s hard to tell.

Will laughs, airy and dizzy, rubbing a hand along his face and up into his own hair, forcing the curls back out of it and between his fingers instead. The movements become shorter, shallower, quicker, taking Hannibal in inches that work his body open, his lungs, his heart, his peculiar mind that notices the subtle twitch of muscle in Hannibal's neck, the way he wets his lips when Will reaches a particular depth and pace, and holds it.

"Tell me," Will insists. "Tell me when you're going to, I want to take you all the way inside me when you do."

They meet in tandem now, joyous exploration turned giddy and frantic, hips against hips, Will's legs splaying wide each time he lowers himself, finding a cyclonic curve through his spine that twists his hips each time he sinks back down. His body is all curves and angles, mathematical impossibilities for describing the beauty of it in motion, unabashed and raw.

Exposed this way for Hannibal, only, after so many failures and so many who just wouldn't have been right. Nothing like the beautiful man beneath him now, so much more than just the eager carnality they find themselves in the throes of - again and again - but a sharp mind and a decency, a quiet stalwart sort of honor that makes Will's heart ache for wanting to be closer to him than they are even now.

Will catches Hannibal's hands in his own, palm to palm, and presses them back against the bed. Bending over him, fingers squeezed interlacing, he kisses him and sighs.

It’s intimate, soft, incredibly hot, and Hannibal can barely breathe as Will pushes against him, coaxes him harder and closer with unerring skill.

“I want you to call out my name,” he breathes, smiling when Will bends to kiss him instead, soft, curious, pushing back against Hannibal’s cock, stilling to listen. “I want your voice to echo through this house until it goes hoarse, and I will hold you on the edge of pleasure until it does.”

It’s a promise, far less than a threat, and it brings a beautiful flush to Will’s cheeks before he smiles, before he sinks back farther and makes a needy little noise at the feeling.

Hannibal curls their fingers together and murmurs something in a language Will does not understand before arching his back and pushing up, pushing Will closer and catching his laughing mouth in another kiss.

Will had already experienced Hannibal's strength when he hoisted him up the stairs, but the power in the movement of him, to buck Will forward, entirely controlled, coils tightly inside

Will and he hums into the kiss, drawing it out a moment more before he leans back, hands still held. He dips his head as though shy.

The grin visible beneath the shaggy curls of hair in his face is anything but.

"Hannibal," purrs Will, but a snap of Hannibal's hips forces his pitch higher before he can stop it, a lilting laugh turned towards the ceiling as he lets his head loll backwards. "Harder, Hannibal." He brings Hannibal's palms to his thighs, fingers joined still, and cock tapping against Hannibal's stomach each time he takes him deep inside.

Every thrust, every rocking motion, he moans Hannibal's name, resisting the urge to touch himself by curling their fingers tighter together, and to instead let his release be won from Hannibal as Will said he would. His cock drips warm against Hannibal's stomach and Will fucks himself harder on Hannibal's length. A stammer catches in his words, almost breathless, dizzy as he begs, louder, "Hannibal, please? Please, Hannibal, I want you to cum for me. I want you to do it inside me. Please, god, Hannibal!"

The pressure, the heat, the sounds Will makes between his desperate words that Hannibal can feel are entirely genuinely meant - it’s almost too much. He curls his hands harder over Will’s, drives into him deeper until he’s keening and laughing breathlessly against him to please, Hannibal, please, god, please -

He cums with Will’s voice pulled tight on his name once more, brings his hand down to curl over Will’s cock and stroke him even as he continues to see stars behind his eyes from the utterly spectacular orgasm.

“Come on, Will,” he sighs, grins, ducks his head to nuzzle him as he shivers and whimpers against him, so, so close until Hannibal turns his hand and it’s too much.

Will slips into an ecstatic collapse against Hannibal, laughing against his cheek as his body thrusts into Hannibal's hand and warmth spreads slick between their stomachs. One hand still caught together with Hannibal's, Will lifts the other to push his fingers through Hannibal's hair, eyes fluttered close and lips parted against his cheek.

"Hannibal," he sighs, tenderly now rather than insistently, an affection rather than a demand. "My name sounds beautiful on your voice."

Biting his lip, Will slides his hips forward enough to feel Hannibal slip free of him, and then slips to his side, a leg still slung across Hannibal's thighs, arm across his chest, and kissing where he nuzzles against his neck.

"Worth the wait," he muses, and tries to let his lungs catch up with his heart, eyes closed and a sheen of sweat across his brow.

The closing door jars Hannibal back to consciousness and he nearly falls out of bed. He’s drowsy, confused for a moment before he feels a sigh against his skin and a warm palm curl up to draw fingers over his chest.

Will sleeps beside him entirely contented, hair mussed and expression slack in pleasure and rest. Hannibal allows himself a moment to appreciate the view before pushing himself to sit. A brief glance at his watch is enough to have him nearly toppling out of bed again.

Downstairs, Mischa is barely out of her scarf when Hannibal greets her from the top of the stairs. Just his undershirt slipped over skin, long sleep pants as though he had taken an early night. He hopes she doesn't notice how messy his hair is. The way she blinks he knows she does.

"Did the lesson go well?" he asks, German smooth and Mischa frowns before answering him in the same language, not yet quite as flawless.

"We covered a lot today, you'll help me practice?"

"All week." He smiles, and after a while, Mischa smiles back. From the kitchen comes a snuffling and Maggie makes herself known, tail up and wagging, mouth open in a doggy grin.

"Two for dinner then," Hannibal says, coming further down the stairs and kissing Mischa gently on her forehead before guiding her to the kitchen to help.

Mischa helps, as expected, and eats, as expected. The lingering curiosity in the narrowing of her eyes never quite goes away, but she doesn't ask. She leaves it instead to Hannibal to open up the conversation and tell her why Will's car is parked in the driveway, when she knows there's no lesson with Maggie tonight. He doesn't address it, but she notices that Hannibal looks more relaxed, even though his hair is a mess and he's underdressed, two things that he normally wouldn't allow to happen so early in the evening.

He laughs when she tells him a German joke that she didn't think was nearly so funny, and Mischa considers that maybe Will's reason for being here doesn't matter so much as his being here at all.

"Goodnight, Mischa. Goodnight, Maggie," Hannibal tells her, once she's bathed and leapt into her bed, the big brown dog snuggled alongside her.

"Goodnight, Hannibal," she replies primly. A pause, and she slips down further into her blankets, hiding all but the top of her head, and her bright narrowed eyes. "Tell Will goodnight from us, too."

Hannibal pauses, lets his eyes slowly close before closing the door behind himself, open just enough for Maggie to go in and out if she needs and pleases. He waits a moment before returning to his room, to Will, pressing a hand against his face to hide a smile and a blush both.

The bed is empty when he returns and for a moment Hannibal is stunned. Very unlike Will to sneak out and leave when he was more than welcome to spend the night. A strangely heavy feeling sets over Hannibal before he hears footsteps on the stairs, unpracticed in staying silent over the one that creaks, and turns.

“You must tell me where you got your shirt, Mr. Graham,” he tells him, soft and pleased as Will closes the door behind himself and tries to hide a smile.

"The same place you got yours," he quips, nodding towards the white undershirt Hannibal slung on in his hurry - too small to be his own, and leaving Will bereft. Will is careful to lower his voice, even as he blushing approaches the bed on cold bare feet. "What I should have gotten was the pants instead."

He unbuttons Hannibal's shirt, expensive cotton that slips easily from his shoulders, and hands it to him - rather than tossing it back to the floor where Will had discarded it previously - as he slides back into bed in just his shorts. There's a click as he sets his phone on the nightstand beside the bed, and a vaguely guilty look.

"Alarm. For the morning." He pauses and tries again, no less embarrassed. "And Bev. Bev was waiting to hear from me. Make sure I'm still alive and, well. Sated."

He draws his legs up beneath the sheets and loops his arms around them, resting his cheek against his knee. "Is it okay?" A shy question, voice from behind wild sex-and-sleep tousled curls of hair. "If I stay. You can say no. I won't mind."

Hannibal regards him, suddenly soft and shy and careful again, and sets one knee to the bed, then his hand, to lean in close and press his lips to Will’s, feeling the cold he had brought inside with him, nuzzling the warmth back against his skin.

“Please stay,” he whispers, pulling back to see Will respond, watch the way his shoulders relax and he exhales in relief. Hannibal kneels on the bed fully and moves closer, to frame Will’s face with his hands and kiss him again, taste his smile.

“I can even offer complimentary breakfast and something to eat now, if you so wish.”

“Complimentary?” Will asks, pretending to remain serious, brows gently furrowed though he can barely keep the laughter from his tone.

“Of course.” Hannibal humors him, “Today you came all on your own, no work to earn yourself dinner.” His eyes narrow but he keeps from outright grinning as he watches Will.

Will seems to consider the offer, stretching his legs out beneath the sheets and wiggling lower. He settles in with an arm under his pillow, watching Hannibal with dry amusement as he replies, "You seemed perfectly content to lie there and let me do the work before. Then again, so was I."

With a toothy grin he catches Hannibal's hand in his own and tugs him nearer, to slip the man's arm around himself and bring him down to lie. When he settles, Will presses his hand to Hannibal's cheek, leaning nearer to kiss him, again and again.

It's nearly domestic, a warmth and familiarity that brings Hannibal to embrace Will and tug him near. The smaller man tucks his head beneath Hannibal’s chin and closes his eyes, allows the quiet calm to settle over himself without resistance - the excitement and newness, the comfort and affection.

He'll have plenty of time to worry about what it all means later, when there aren't arms wrapped around him and long legs twined with his.

"Breakfast," Will agrees, and adds, amused, "but you know we really should stop planning all of this around food. If we eat every time I want to spend time with you or... do this, we're going to be enormous."

Hannibal hums, warm, contented, tired, and buries his face in the warm curls.

“Only for special occasions, then,” he murmurs.

It’s only much later, when he wakes to shift, arm numb where Will is resting heavy against it in sleep, does he remember Mischa’s smug request hours before. He supposes it doesn’t much matter, now. He supposes, smiling, settling back into sleep, it doesn’t at all.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> “I told him,” Will starts, before parting his lips with his tongue and covering his face with his hand, laughing. “I told him I was going to ride him until I -” he whispers, hesitating, “you know.”
>
> “You didn’t,” blinks Bev, and after a beat, she laughs loud, wide-eyed. “You did. Holy hell, Graham.”
>
> “I don’t know what gets into me,” he murmurs into his hands, both now, elbows on the bar.
>
> Bev snorts, “I do.”

"She said that?" Bev grins, almost bounces in her chair before laughing again. "With the tone and everything?"

Will nods, unable to keep the smile from his face either, then he shakes his head.

"I wasn't nearly drunk enough for that. Or awake enough for it."

"But you were in his shirt."

Will swallows. "Yes."

"And in your tiny speedo pants."

"Boxers."

"And Mischa -"

"Asked me very seriously what my intentions were towards her brother," Will repeats, sullen, and Bev snorts with laughter.

"That kid deserves a medal."

"I can't go back there, Bev. It’s entirely unprofessional now."

"Why? 'Cause you took my advice and fucked that man breathless?"

Will makes a helpless groaning sound and tilts his head back to toss another shot down his throat. Bev cackles.

"Come on," she wheedles. "She's a smart kid, she can see you make each other happy. She didn't run you out the door or complain to her brother, she hugged you and told you to treat him well."

Will runs his hand over his lips to snare the taste of whiskey from it and sighs.

God, you've got a mouth on you.

He feels his cheeks burn at the thought.

"That's not her place, though," Will finally answers, pushing his hands back through his hair instead and finding that just as fraught with memories. "I mean, her concern for him, yes, of course, she should be - well, not about me, but," he sighs, starting again. "It's not fair for me to put her in that role. She's got enough to deal with, don't you think?"

Bev lifts her fingers towards the bartender to signal for two more, and polishes off her own shot effortlessly.

"I think," she answers slowly, "that you know how helpful it is to have something else to focus on, other than the disorder. Normalcy. Real life, rather than trauma."

Lips pressing into a thoughtful pout, Will murmurs, "He's very careful with her."

"Exactly. And you loved when people handled you like a fragile, broken little teacup, didn't you?" Her brows lift beneath her hair as she skims a shot across the damp, warped wood bar towards him. "I'd bet that also means he wouldn't let anyone near her if he thinks they'll be a problem. Drink. You think too much."

He does, relieved by the weight and warmth of cheap whiskey settled against the greasy burger they shared at a diner before finding their way here. Dim lights, dark corners and cheap drinks, Bev hadn't been able to resist tugging Will along with her, and he hadn't been in any sort of state to resist such a necessary outing.

In truth, Will finds hasn't been in much of a state to resist anything since he declared himself a lumberjack and did, in fact, climb Hannibal like a tree. His cheeks warm as he remembers the surprise on the man's face when Will told Hannibal his intentions towards him, the way he settled back strong and beautiful to let Will work himself into an ecstasy astride him.

"What did you tell her?"

Will blinks at Bev, and her grin turns devious.

"Okay," she amends. "First, tell me what you told her. And then tell me what were you just thinking about. Details, Graham. All of them."

He sighs, remembers the narrowed eyes that regarded him across the counter, her little arms folded across it as she sat on the stool across from where Will stood in stunned silence, hands wrapped gratefully around a mug of coffee.

"My *intentions*?" asked Will, and she nodded, once, firmly. "Where did you even hear th-"

“A movie,” Mischa replied primly. “I liked the way it sounded.”

"Ah.” He had blinked, brought the mug to his lips to keep them occupied before he said something stupid. Mischa watched him, dark eyes narrowed further still and Will had known that until he gave an answer, even Hannibal returning from his shower would not save him.

"Well I... your brother and I... Hannibal and -"

"Do you like him?"

Will had swallowed. "Yes."

"Very much?"

"Very much."

A moment more of narrowed eyes and tense shoulders before Mischa had laughed and buried her face in her folded hands.

"You guys are awesome."

"Awesome?" Bev grins. "She said you were awesome?"

"That we were."

A chuckle and Bev downs another shot, claps Will on the shoulder until he does the same, keeping up and feeling already pleasantly warm somewhat weightless.

"She is a smart kid," Bev repeats, orders another drink for them both, fingers to Will’s lips to keep him quiet and all protestations at bay. "She loves her brother and can see when others do too. She won't get rid of something like that."

"I don't -"

"Drink."

Will does.

"Now, what was the glazed look for before. Spill."

Another long sigh, but this time it’s with a grin, as Will feels his nerves begin to steady, the usual tightly-wound strings loosening, tuning lower in the cheerful company and cheap drinks.

“I told him,” Will starts, before parting his lips with his tongue and covering his face with his hand, laughing. “I told him I was going to ride him until I -” he whispers, hesitating, “you know.”

“You didn’t,” blinks Bev, and after a beat, she laughs loud, wide-eyed. “You did. Holy hell, Graham.”

“I don’t know what gets into me,” he murmurs into his hands, both now, elbows on the bar.

Bev snorts, “I do.”

“Shut up,” Will laughs, but it quickly shifts into a groan. “I hope I didn’t say anything embarrassing. Other people, in the past - some like it, some really don’t, I don’t know what I say sometimes. It’s just... *words*.”

“Did he like it?”

Will glances at her through his fingers before dropping his hands, a smile pressed small across his lips.

“He told me not to stop.”

Incorrigibly pleased, Bev leans over the bar and watches Will for a moment, eyes glinting with a look that he knows means nothing good.

“Kinsey Six, I’d never have guessed you for the type,” she admits, grinning. “You know what you should do.”

“I have a feeling you’re going to tell me.”

“Damn straight,” she scoffs, and then smirks around her beer. “You should call him.”

“Why?”

"Because it's been four days and I had to peel your pining ass off the floor after work. Call him. Hear his voice, let him hear yours."

"I won't talk dirty to him on the phone, Bev."

"Another two, make ‘em doubles." The barman doesn't even pretend not to listen, and Will feels his cheeks darken.

"I'm not calling him."

"You are."

"No. I have dignity. Self-preservation."

"Yes, yes - you are a strong and confident man, very good. Drink."

Will does.

"Dial."

Will sighs, takes his phone from the counter and sets it into his pocket.

"Nope."

"Barkeep!"

-=-

The fact that he can still find the buttons is miraculous. The fact that he knows how to find Hannibal's number to dial is incredible. The fact that the phone is already ringing by the time it hits him that Bev has conned him into drunk-dialing his - boyfriend? lover? - Hannibal is what makes Will pale.

He fumbles with the screen trying to shut the thing off, to end the call, at least take the fucking thing off speaker -

"Will.” The voice is warm, so familiar, and Will settles into a comfortable sprawl against the bar, phone to his ear, speaker thankfully off.

"I... hi."

"Good evening." There is amusement there, genuine delight and softness and Will wants to turn against him and nuzzle into his chest.

“Sorry it’s been a few days,” Will begins, nose wrinkling as he does, always poor form to start with an apology. “Dogs,” he explains, and sucks his lower lip into his mouth to stop from saying more.

"But of course." A pause, there, and Will wonders if Hannibal can hear the sounds of the bar, loud and filled with people and the click of glass to glass as drinks are poured. Then he wonders how he could *not* hear it.

"I am glad to hear you've kept busy. It is good to hear you again, Will. Not that the messages flooding my phone were not appreciated, I do thoroughly enjoy listening to your voice."

"What did he say?" Bev stage whispers, flattening herself to the bar as Will is.

“*Flooding*?” exclaims Will, to Bev’s bewilderment and Will’s own dismay, clapping a hand over his mouth. He stares at her, she at him, before he holds his fingers up to his mouth instead to shush her and turns back towards the bar, phone cradled close. “Sorry if there were - a lot. God,” he swears, eyes squeezing closed. He pushes his fingers against them under his glasses. “This is the part where I apologize for apologizing. How are you?”

“Tell him you miss his -”

“Bev!” hisses Will softly, though certainly not as softly as he thinks he does.

"More than it is used to getting," Hannibal admits, "but none unwelcome."

Around Will, the bar seems to feel fuller, grow more oppressing and loud compared to Hannibal's comfortably quiet tone.

"I have missed you,” comes the gentle reply to Will’s fumbling question. "Today has kept me busy with lectures, as has the weekend with study. A thoroughly dull existence when I would

rather fill my ears with your words." A darker implication and Will can feel that lofty look, that feigned indifference when Hannibal feels anything but.

Will's grin says more than any words could, and Bev claps her hands, laughing loud before draping herself back across the bar, as though by getting nearer to Will, she could hear the conversation. He leans away from her, turning on the stool to face her, eyes narrowed in a playful, suspicious squint.

As though a switch were flipped, Will feels his tone settle a little lower, mouth a little closer to the phone. "I like thinking about you in class, though," he admits, picking at a flaking bit of lacquer on the bar. "Attentive. Studious. Terribly clever. Do you wear those suits to class or just for me?"

In the moment of silence that follows the question, Will's eyes widen. He points at himself, mouths to Bev *I told you!* and shakes his head, removing his glasses as though it might obscure the sight of his own embarrassment.

Will's voice isn't slurred, he isn't inebriated so much as utterly, beautifully carefree. There is a weight to his words, though, that Hannibal notes, remembers, plays with.

"Did you manage to eat, before your tryst at the bar?"

"Yes," Will grins, making a point to drag out the sibilant as Hannibal laughs.

"Pity. I would have offered to make you dinner."

"We never eat dinner," Will points out, squirming comfortably on his stool as Bev nearly crawls over him to get to the phone, gesturing for another drink even as the barman laughs and shakes his head, but complies.

"I had planned to spread you on my table instead," comes the irritatingly pleased response.

"Oh?" Will's tone is coy, almost distracted, as though he half-heard the remark that in truth twists pleasurably in his stomach. "That's funny - I was thinking about that, too."

"You were." Half-question, half-agreement.

"Mmm," hums Will, taking a sip - rather than the whole shot - of cheap whiskey and flinching at the burn. "But I'd thought about it the other way around."

Bev is frantic now, clambering at the bartender for a pen and a napkin.

"You think too much."

Will laughs and Bev shoves the napkin at him, words scribbled barely legible and scrawling.

like a treeeeeeee

Will pushes her away like one would a persistent animal and she collapses into a giggling pile on the bar again.

“I’ve heard that before,” he answers ruefully, watching Bev from the corner of his eye. “I’ve also been told I should try to do less of it. Gets me into trouble. Should I stop thinking about that, then? In particular?”

The napkin slips back into his field of vision and he squints at it.

make him your rodeo pony

“Jesus,” Will breathes, staring shocked at Bev who simply beams at him.

“I suppose I can’t force the mind to let go of something it is so partial to,” Hannibal responds, happily ignoring the laughter in the background, the struggle as Will twists from Bev’s grip in her continued efforts to hear the conversation.

“The table is cleared from an earlier far more civilized meal, the house empty and quiet.”

Will draws a breath and Hannibal allows that thought to insinuate itself into Will’s mind alongside the other images.

“A late class tomorrow allows me plenty of time to stay up. Though I may consider changing out of the suit.”

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

A warm sound, a mixture of a purr and a laugh, and Hannibal says nothing else.

“So,” Will stammers, his face warm with embarrassment and desire and whiskey, “should I -”

“Yes.”

The speed of the answer forces Will to draw a breath, blinking wide, and he settles his glasses clumsily back on his nose.

“But if you are out enjoying company,” Hannibal begins, and Will sputters in response.

“No, no, I mean - yes, but -”

Hannibal hums and Will shivers at the sound of it.

“I’ll be there in twenty.”

He hangs up before he can say anything else, and stares at his phone until Hannibal’s name darkens from the screen.

Bev sets her chin against his shoulder and leans heavier on him. Will brings a hand to his face and laughs.

“Fuck.”

“I told you you should call him.”

“He will be the end of me, I fucking swear.”

“Yea you do, every damn day.”

“Shut up.”

A brief wrestling match more akin to little children swatting at each other before Will extricates himself enough to ask the barman for the number of a cab company he can use.

“You’re not coming.”

“Like hell I’m not, I have to see this.”

“I don’t need supervision.”

“You need a fucking audience,” Bev laughs.

“But not an audience while fucking,” he retorts blithely, and her laugh deepens.

“Go then,” sighs Bev, a little wistful as she waves a hand at him. “Go forth and make me proud, Kinsey Six. And don’t drink any more, I want you sober enough to tell me all about it later. You’ve got rubbers?”

Will glances from her to the entirely disinterested bartender, and back again as he slides unsteadily from his barstool. “Christ, what do you - do you just keep a stash on you all the time?”

“Better safe than not-laid,” she shrugs with a smile.

He returns it, genuinely, and leans in to press a kiss to her forehead before murmuring a soft, honest thanks.

“You can make it up to me by buying the drinks next time. Get out of here,” she grins, giving him a shove towards the door where his cab is already waiting.

Will goes, a brief stumble but nothing horrific, and dictates the address to the driver before he even closes the door.

The drive is quiet, fast, no traffic to delay them and Will realizes that it’s past 10PM now, that it might be entirely unwelcome to barge in on the man so late at night without so much as notice but *god*, all he can think is of Hannibal alone in the house, Mischa asleep with Maggie near and the door closed… Hannibal in his suit - which in Will’s groggy mind is partially undone despite his insistence that Hannibal keep it entirely on - sitting behind his desk, writing notes, studying, before Will pushes him over it and -

“Kid.”

Will blinks, staring wide-eyed at the driver.

“This the place?”

He blinks again.

“Yea.”

He fumbles with the money, tipping well for the quick drive and pours himself from the cab out onto the sidewalk. He only knocks once before the door is open and Hannibal smiles at him, warm and already relaxed after his day, hair messy against his forehead, but suit impeccably in place.

“Will.” he murmurs.

“Hi,” Will responds, his grin restrained to a slight, sleepy smile. Already comfortable here, in the house that overwhelmed him so entirely the first few times he visited, put at ease by simply seeing Hannibal again, an imposing beauty that gentles as they regard each other in contented silence a moment more.

He knows that Hannibal feels the same coziness as Will does, the same relief of being near the one who already occupies so much of their thoughts.

He wonders, distantly, if perhaps it’s all moving a little too quickly, but with the warmth of whiskey weighing heavy in him, he can’t be bothered to overthink it now.

“I just want to look at you,” sighs Will, eyes alighting up to meet Hannibal’s, and then drifting downward again to take him in. “Just for a minute.”

Hannibal hums again, leans just enough to pull the door closed behind Will and settle them both within the quiet, dark hallway.

“The light is better upstairs.” Hannibal tells him, voice barely above a whisper, standing so close that when he ducks his head to speak he can feel Will’s warm curls against his chin. He brings a hand up to stroke his knuckles down Will’s arm, smiling when he looks up and follows one step, then another, as Hannibal steps backwards to lead him to the stairs.

“An enjoyable evening?” he asks, brow raises in amusement, knowing his own house well enough to never falter, never trip.

Will, however, does, stumbling up the stairs and catching himself on his hands with a laugh. He pins his hand to his mouth to try and muffle it, eyes wide as he looks up at Hannibal, and his grin lingers as he holds his hand out and mouths that he’s *okay, sorry, sorry* before righting himself again.

His hand is caught and held, and without hesitation Will brings Hannibal’s fingers to his lips, sighing warmly against them as he follows him up into the bedroom.

“Yes,” he finally answers, dropping to sit on the edge of the bed and watch Hannibal quietly shut the door behind them. “Although it stands to be improved.” He worries his lip between his teeth for a moment and then plants his hands back on the bed, a suggestion in his body language that he doesn’t realize he makes. “You?”

“Truly dull,” Hannibal laments, watching Will where he is before taking a few quiet steps to stand in front of him, eyes down to observe every inch of the man presented to him, knowing what a beautiful body rests beneath the casual comfortable clothes he wears.

“Until you called.”

One hand comes up to work his tie loose as he tilts his head to finally meet Will’s eyes.

“You have quite the gift for invading my mind with your words,” he tells him, voice low and amused, despite the door being closed, despite the thickness of the old house walls and the corridor separating them and Mischa’s room.

“Will you keep your word, then?” Hannibal asks, the end of the tie finally slipping loose from the elaborate knot.

Wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue, Will watches the silk slide free from Hannibal’s neck, folded in half by careful hands and set gently aside on the nightstand.

“Which word was that?” responds Will, and he huffs a soft laugh, pressing a hand to his face beneath his glasses. “I say a lot of things. If I’m lucky I remember them all the next day and it wasn’t anything too horrifying.” He lets his hand drop, frames balanced on the end of his nose, and eyes turned upwards over their rims to watch Hannibal.

“If it’s ever,” Will begins, and sighs, “annoying. You should tell me. I’ve been told before, it’s fine. I can’t promise I can stop it, always - god,” he laughs again. “The things you do to me, especially, but I can try.”

Hannibal smiles, a warm - tired - smile as he works the first three buttons of his shirt open before undoing his jacket and sliding out of that, letting it rest in a semi-folded pile atop the tie, forgoing his usual neatness for this.

“What was it you said to me regarding my removing my suit?” He watches Will bite his lip, cheeks darkening with the aid of alcohol and his own arousal both, before the man responds.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Will breathes, and Hannibal grins, taking the necessary step to stand in front of Will before he sinks gracefully to his knees before him, hands sliding warm down Will’s thighs and gently grasping behind his knees to spread them, for Hannibal to sit closer, eyes up on Will the entire time.

“The same shall apply for your exquisitely colorful language,” Hannibal tells him, eyes dark and expression pleased, almost wicked, as he brings one hand up to work open the button of Will’s jeans.

“Don’t,” he breathes, “you fucking dare,” slips his hand down to work Will free from the constraints of the fabric against him, already semi-hard as he sits speechless and unmoving above Hannibal, “stop.”

Will’s eyes fall heavy-lidded at the words, a soft sound issued from between his bitten lips. There’s something far more intoxicating than any whiskey could provide in hearing Hannibal

- strikingly handsome, pristinely put-together - say those words to him in the sophisticated rumble of his low voice and the warm accent that winds its way throughout.

“Christ, you’re beautiful,” Will sighs, reaching out to cup Hannibal’s cheek in his hand. His thumb follows the carved contour of his cheekbone, strokes the soft skin beneath his eye, and his fingers twitch as he feels cool air and heated touch against his cock, tugged free from his threadbare boxers.

“Will you?” he asks, and Hannibal tilts his head to the side, a smile caught in one corner of his mouth.

“Will I what, Will?”

He draws a sharp breath as he is stroked, once, and lower his hand to support himself against the bed as he watches Hannibal, blue eyes suddenly dark with pupil from beneath the untidy curls that fall in front of them.

“Suck it,” Will asks softly, and then insists, face rosy with the intensity of his blush. “I want you to suck me.”

Hannibal blinks, a deliberate and slow thing before ducking his head, eyes still up, to do as he’s asked, lips parting hot against the head and taking Will deeper as he watches. The way Will’s eyes widen, the way his lips part in sympathy as he takes a quick breath and holds it before groaning softly.

It’s a gentle teasing, slow sucking and a soft tongue, but it’s enough to have Will trembling, his thighs spreading further still as far as the jeans tight around them allow, to allow Hannibal closer.

A hand settles in the messy warm strands and fingertips run along the scalp until Hannibal closes his eyes to the sensation and hums, pulling off entirely and breathing against the wet skin.

“I have not been able to stop thinking about you,” he admits, rough, quiet, tilting his head to draw his lips over just the side of Will’s cock before kissing the base of it. “Astride me, the heat of you…”

It’s hardly even the sensation of it that pulls a shiver through Will’s limbs, sends his fingers grasping tighter through Hannibal’s hair. It’s the sight of him, this charming, intelligent man, lips pressed against Will’s now hard cock, flushed and hard against Hannibal’s cheek, that draws another moan from him.

“Fuck,” sighs Will, forcing his eyes to remain open when they begin to drift closed. “I can’t stop thinking about it either. Distracting,” he grins a little, sheepish, almost sleepy with alcohol and arousal. “The way you looked under me, spent. Sweaty. Perfect.”

He leans forward, curling over Hannibal beneath him, and kisses his hair, runs his hands down the man’s back to feel the strength of his muscles.

“I want you beneath me again,” Will murmurs close to Hannibal’s ear. “Spread this time, for me. Will you?”

Hannibal makes a soft sound, one that radiates through Will’s entire form in a delicious shiver. His fingers tighten in Hannibal’s hair before relaxing. Then Hannibal pulls away, leans in to finally kiss Will properly, lips parted for him as he kneels, back arched, between his legs and rests his hands soft against Will’s thighs.

“Wide and aching,” he confirms quietly, watching another pleased shiver take Will, watching the way his blush grows dark over his cheeks and nose as Will bites his lip at the words.

“I have rather desperately missed you,” Hannibal admits, soft words, a tilt of his head to brush his nose against Will’s softly, “Thought about you every day, couldn’t sleep and thought about you then as well.”

He shifts closer, spreads Will’s legs so he can press closer still, nuzzles into the hands against him.

The eager surge Will felt at Hannibal’s confirmation quiets a little, as his words fill him instead of a ravenous desire. He blinks his surprise, speechless for a moment as he holds Hannibal’s face gently in his hands, smooths the hair back from the man’s face to see his eyes, earnest and serene, and Will draws a breath at the sight.

“I missed you too,” Will responds softly, as surprised by the honesty in his own words as he is by the fact he’s managed to say them. “I want -” The words stick on a hard swallow and when he smiles a little, it catches in the corners of his eyes. “I want to see you. More. A lot.” A laugh then, almost shy, an absurd thing really considering how freely he spoke moments before. “All the time, really.”

He turns his attention briefly towards the ceiling, puffing out a sigh that pushes aside one of the shaggy twists of hair in his face.

“Probably explains all the texts, I guess.” Will grins a little. “Flooding you with them.”

Hannibal turns into the hands holding him, sets his own against the mattress and pushes himself up until Will has to lean back for them to remain close, until he’s lying and Hannibal on top of him, kissing him softly, once, again.

“How convenient, so do I.” he murmurs, kissing Will’s neck, curling a hand through his hair as he shifts Will further over the bed and follows him, smiling, nuzzling, pressing close to the person who makes him so happy, who keeps his thoughts utterly distracted.

“I suppose it would be polite to ask you on a date.” he muses gently, catching Will’s eyes long enough to narrow his own in amusement.

A note of laughter escapes before Will closes it off in a kiss, pressing his palms to Hannibal’s cheeks and settling back against the pillows.

“I suppose it would be polite to agree to one,” he responds, brows lifting lightly when Hannibal returns a look of mild surprise, but there is only a shy amusement in the curve of Will’s lips before he ducks almost shyly into another kiss, longer this time.

It’s a fine line to walk, made muddled by whiskey and want, and Will doesn’t let himself venture nearer it than he already has. Positive steps rather than avoidance, but he navigates a gentle deflection instead as he wraps a leg around Hannibal’s hip and turns them both. Hannibal yields, settling back against the bed, and Will sits comfortably atop him again.

“This is how you’ve thought about me?” he asks, lips pursed in pleasure and curiously coy as he pitches his hair back from his face with a toss of his head. Will runs his palms firmly from Hannibal’s stomach up across his chest, teasing with his fingernails against the fine shirt when he drags them back down.

A pleased hum and Hannibal lays back further, tilts his head to watch Will arch and bend beautifully for him. He allows his hands to rest over Will’s thighs, stroke up them, down again, amused in seeing the man still bared to him, if a little.

“I have thought of you often.” he confirms, “I have thought of you bared further for me. I have thought of the way your hips shift just so, when you’re close. I have thought of your mouth and the things that spill from it.”

A smile, dark as the flush against Will’s face, and Hannibal slides his hands under Will’s shirt, now, over his skin, curling his fingers to gently run nails down his back in pleasurable parallel lines.

“Is this how you have thought about me?”

Will curves, a slow-rolling undulation down the length of his spine, as Hannibal’s nails skim against his bare skin, hardly covered as it is beneath a thin t-shirt and a well-worn hooded sweatshirt he’s yet to shed.

“Among many variations,” Will agrees, biting his lip in a crooked grin. “Should I show you how I’ve thought about you the most?”

All it takes is the brief upturn of Hannibal’s smile that gathers beneath his eyes, and Will knows he has his answer.

Relaxing his legs down either side of Hannibal’s own, Will leans forward onto his hands over Hannibal, bringing a kiss beneath his jaw, careful not to leave marks even as he presses his teeth there, sucks against the soft skin revealed when Hannibal tilts his head back obliging. He smells of aftershave, something mild but beautifully masculine, and Will draws in a long breath through his nose, dizzied by it, before he kisses lower still.

He makes quick work of the man’s shirt, peeling it back off his shoulders with certain hands, taking a moment to revel in the sight of Hannibal bared again beneath him before sliding his attentions lower to work off his pants as well.

“Wide and aching,” Will sighs against Hannibal’s mouth, leaning back as Hannibal attempts to kiss him, smile widening.

Hannibal just watches him, eyes hooded and lips tilting in a smile as Will speaks, as he teases and pulls further away. He lets him, shifts just enough to feel Will’s eyes flick away, down against his chest and stomach and lower still again. Without a word, Hannibal draws up his knees, allows the gentle stroke of Will’s palms against his thighs before deliberately, slowly spreading them.

He relishes the intake of breath, the way Will’s eyes widen at the utter openness, the submission of it all, how willing and free Hannibal is with his motions, just for Will.

“What else?” Hannibal asks.

A sigh, a laugh, something in between as Will peels first out of his own pants, tossed to the floor alongside Hannibal’s, and then his sweatshirt, his undershirt, until he’s bare, a shiver drawing goosebumps up bare arms as his hair fluffs around his face.

“Christ,” Will mutters, smoothing it back from his eyes with one hand and sitting back on his knees. “Where do I even start with you?”

To say that Hannibal takes good care of himself is an understatement, and Will vaguely recalls bemoaning to Bev that he described him once as *‘some sort of demigod or something, oh hell why does he want to sleep with me’* in between shots of whiskey.

It’s a valid question still, as he lets his hands slide over Hannibal’s bare thighs, to feel the movements beneath warm skin, strong and powerful. Up to the join of his legs, rocking his thumbs there to press almost tickling, before he wraps both his hands around Hannibal’s length and sighs at the weight of it, hard beneath his fingers.

He strokes lightly, languidly a few times before letting his cock settle against his belly, and leaning to tug open the nightstand drawer instead. A quick fumbling to grab the lube, and Will drizzles it across his fingers - mouth marking a path through the thick hair on Hannibal’s chest - before he presses two up between his legs, against his opening, circling slowly to tease.

“I want to be inside you,” Will declares quietly, lifting his eyes towards Hannibal, utterly devious. “Feel you around me, hot and tight and writhing.”

Hannibal makes a noise, nothing Will can even place but the sound itself is so pleasant that he makes one of his own to match, kissing against warm skin again. He adds gentle pressure, feeling Hannibal adjust, lift his hips a little, but not pull away, not stop this. So he presses the tip of one finger in gently.

A moan, slow to come and deep, and Hannibal presses his lips together before sighing.

“Entirely at your mercy for it,” he allows, smile matching Will’s before he pushes deeper and Hannibal softens a little, too pleased for a moment to keep up the game.

“I touched,” he admits, careful with his words, deliberate choices as he watches Will above him take in everything before him. “Pressed as deep as my fingers would allow, thinking of you.”

“Oh?” is all Will can manage, and even that utterance catches in his throat. It occurs to him that perhaps the partner who once told him once that his penchant for talking too much during sex was ‘annoying’ was in all likelihood a fucking idiot, as Will can’t remember a time when words alone have snared so tightly in his belly.

The breath that held burning in Will’s chest is exhaled slowly as he sinks against Hannibal, settled between his legs, and rocks himself forward against the man, pressing his own finger deep with one fluid movement.

“You feel so good already,” Will murmurs, watching heavy-lidded as Hannibal’s lips part for his words, in mimic to how his body does for Will’s touch. “All week I’ve thought about this,” he admits. “Feeling you like this, open for me.”

Carefully, a second finger joins the first, and for a moment Will imagines he might finish just from that thrilling tightness alone.

Hannibal does not respond with anything but laxity, arching and turning against Will’s hands, bringing his own down to rest against his hair, down to his shoulders, to pull him closer, coax, nudge, enjoying the delicious stretch that is done so gently it’s almost an ache in itself.

“Will,” he murmurs, head back, eyes barely open, then his lip slides between his teeth as Will curls his fingers and finds his prostate, sending his back rigid with pleasure for a moment before Hannibal exhales harshly and licks his lips.

Another curl, another arch and Will’s eyes widen watching Hannibal respond, not quite as loud, as open as Will has been, but so responsive, honest with it.

“Will,” he laughs, bringing one hand back to press to his lips before he pushes it higher to cover his eyes, grins and moans softly. “Now, if you want me to be any use at all, Christ,” Hannibal swallows, pulls his hand away to look at Will again. “Your fingers will be the death of me,”

The praise draws an unexpected blush back to Will’s cheeks and he grins a little, hiding it against Hannibal’s neck before latching on to another lingering kiss.

“Worse ways to go than that, I guess,” he laughs, sighing, before slipping his fingers free to fumble open a condom for himself, wisely snared when he dug around in the drawer before. Will’s attention is drawn towards Hannibal, hands resting against his open thighs, just *there*.

Waiting.

For him.

Will shivers as he rolls down the rubber and slicks himself generously, a brief denouement that feels far longer than it takes. Too far away, too cold in this room, and so Will lays low

over Hannibal again, catching Hannibal's lower lip between his teeth to tug teasing against it before he kisses him soundly and rolls his hips forward against him.

"Hard?" Will asks, breath shortened already just by aligning himself.

"Won't break," comes the breathless reply, and then Will is snared in warm arms, holding him close as he takes his time pushing in, adjusting to the tightness, letting Hannibal adjust to the girth, unfamiliar still, new, delicious.

"Fuck." It's harsh, stifled behind gritted teeth but Will hears it, delights in the expletive entirely foreign on Hannibal's lips, delights in knowing he had been the one to draw it.

When he's buried, all the way in, Hannibal blinks rapidly, turns his head to look at Will, to smile at him, himself flushed and warm, eyes wide and bright in the light of the one lamp lit in the room. He catches Will's lips against his own and draws his knees higher, hands curling together against Will's shoulders to hold him closer still.

"Hard," he confirms, grinning, dragging his nails down Will's back again to have him bend, arch up like a cat.

"Good," Will purrs, nuzzling into another kiss, and with lips tangled, he presses a hand into the pillow beside Hannibal, just enough for leverage.

He does start slow, a gentle rocking motion for both to adjust, until the movement becomes easier, and Will feels the tension loosen from Hannibal's legs around him.

It's only then that Will's hips jerk a little deeper, and words drip softly from his lips against Hannibal's ear.

"You're so tight," he murmurs, pleased, as though Hannibal had done this for him deliberately. "I'm going to fuck you so hard you feel me every time you sit down for a lecture."

Hannibal hums, arches back, allows his body to relax as the pace increases, as their breaths grow hotter against each other, as their kisses become little more than brushes of lips in passing.

It's perfect, hard and quick and deep, enough to push Hannibal up against the headboard, to curl his back against the mattress, to draw red lines over Will's back over and over with manicured nails.

"Oh, God, Will…"

"Again."

Hannibal's eyes open a little wider to regard him, near enough that their noses brush.

"Again," Will insists, his voice no higher than a coarse whisper.

"Will -"

“Again,” sighs Will, ducking his head as he grabs for the headboard, both hands, Hannibal bent beneath him as Will drives into him with long, deep thrusts, each one rattling the bed beneath them.

“Will,” Hannibal breathes again, and Will hisses through his teeth as Hannibal’s nails dig deeper into his back.

“God, Hannibal -”

Dropping a hand from the headboard, Will runs it along the bend of Hannibal’s ass, slipping his fingers between them to feel the man open, hot, around him, and groaning low at the feel of where his body joins Hannibal’s. His hand skims higher, then, up the powerful curve of Hannibal’s thigh, to catch him behind the knee and widen him, just a little further, to press himself deeper.

Hannibal is beautiful, always, a fascination to Will - handsome, intensely so, with nearly a look of royalty, Will considers. But his daily charm pales in compare to seeing the man like this, blonde hair tousled into his eyes, a sheen of sweat across his flushed face, every muscle in his body pulled wonderfully taut.

With a grin, Will reaches between them, to grasp Hannibal’s cock only very softly in his fingers.

“I want to see you cum for me,” he intones softly. “I want you to cum with me inside you, Hannibal. I want to feel it. I want *you* to feel it. God,” Will groans softly, feeling Hannibal tense around him again. “Cum while I’m fucking you, Hannibal.”

"Shit -"

The words are cloying, twisting, a new sensation itself, and Hannibal groans, arches up against Will’s hand, down and back against his cock, still driving deep and quick into him, enough so send his skin pimpling from cold and radiating heat, enough to draw another sound from him.

"Harder," he begs, rough, accent strong like this, not kept in check at all this way, so undone and so close to more.

Will complies, a rough laugh and Hannibal sees stars as Will brushes against his prostate in an unrelenting rhythm. And then he cums.

A moan, gritted teeth and bunched brows and Hannibal feels his entire body release from the sensation, blinking his eyes rapidly open to see Will again, above him, *there*.

"Fuck," he breathes, feeling his lips tilt in a grin. "Will."

“Again,” Will sighs, but now his voice shakes as he asks for it, insisting, begging, *needing*.

Hannibal reaches up to thread his fingers through Will’s hair, wrapping firm in his wild curls to tug the smaller man against him, surrounding him in arms and legs, and panting hard against his ear, “Will.”

Neck craned, eyes closed, it takes only that for Will to lose himself as well, the long moan of release punctuated by the diminishing bucking of his hips, slower, slower still, until with sticky wet warmth between them, Will all but collapses onto Hannibal.

“Now who’s got a mouth,” mumbles Will, ruefully amused. He curls his arms up around Hannibal’s neck, pulling comfortably out of him and tensing pleasurably at the sound it draws from Hannibal.

It's too hot to slip under the covers, too hot to do anything but lie against each other, spent and pleasantly exhausted. Hannibal settles his arms around Will’s shoulders and dozes, can feel Will’s breathing slow and even out against him.

"You are the only one to bring that out in me," Hannibal finally replies, a soft sort of promise between them as he feels Will smile and nuzzle against Hannibal’s chest, parting his lips to bite gently against the skin.

Cleanup is not elaborate and just barely coordinated. Another quick, cool bath with the cloth from the bathroom before they settle together again, a heavy, sleepy, delighted pile of bodies with tangled limbs and soft smiles.

Hannibal isn't sure who falls asleep first, but he knows when he wakes, once, in the early, early morning, he can feel Will sound asleep against him.

He returns to sleep with a smile, nose buried in the warm curls and arms loose over the man against him.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> Will sprawls across the paperwork, arm tucked beneath his cheek, and digs his phone out of the drawer where he threw it that morning.
>
> “Is there a word for being preemptively embarrassed, in anticipation of doing something embarrassing?” he asks, tapping a finger absently against the darkened screen.
>
> Bev snorts. “Yeah, pretty sure that's called 'a waste of time'.”

"I think that we should wait."

Will hardly recognizes his own voice, the adamant hiss that passes through his teeth, jaw already tense.

"How long?"

"Until we're ready."

The silence drags over heartbeats skewed faster, and Will settles a hand against the cheek of the stalwart partner at his side. To comfort him, to reassure.

Will knows it's a gesture meant to do the same for himself, to no avail. His heart pounds, mouth dry, but these are not new feelings, he reminds himself. Perfectly normal. Expected.

Anticipation.

Uncertainty.

Fear.

The decision was made long before Will could protest, even now as he insists in a terse sigh, “This isn’t right - we should take time, stack the odds in our favor -”

His radio clicks silent and he regards it for a heartbeat, two, before Will draws his sidearm and shifts into position.

The entry is clean, but the shouts announcing their presence are not, and Will keeps a hand low against Winston at his side. He can feel the tension in his partner’s body, trembling beneath his fur, and Will wonders if Winston, too, feels the sinking sensation in his belly that Will does as they split and check a side room.

“Clear!” Will calls out, but he knows how wrong he is when the word breaks the silence of the bedroom, a tattered mattress on the floor, strange marks darkening the walls. He follows their patterns, blinking wide in the darkness, he’s seen these before, carved into pallid skin, bloodless wounds gaping wide in spirals.

Stepping around a pile of blankets, filthy and reeking, Will approaches the wall and holsters his sidearm. Cacophony from elsewhere in the house - calls and responses, his team, no other voices - and Will removes his flashlight from his belt instead, clicking it to illuminate the sigils spread before him.

“Blood,” murmurs Will.

Anticipation.

Fear.

Certainty.

“This is the house!” But he can’t warn them fast enough, can’t warn himself even before a door slams open behind him. A closet, dark corners, missed, and he wheels fast, flashlight clattering to his feet and sidearm stuck, fumbled, a blade flashing through the motes of dust caught in the bright beam.

He shouts but he doesn’t know what - something, maybe nothing - and stumbles forward, shoulder driving into the hulking man who swings wildly towards Winston. It hits Will instead, sunk into his arm, the gap between his bulletproof vest and neck, and he drops to the filthy mattress.

Snarling, savage, the man and the dog tangled in a blur of teeth and hands and fur and skin. Shots bang, explosive, deafen him and he feels weight collapse onto the mattress beside him.

A warm body, heavy, breathing steady, blood soaking through Will’s shirt, hot against his skin grown suddenly and horribly cold.

“Winston,” Will rattles, forcing himself to his back, eyes on an unfamiliar ceiling. He can see the movement of his breath, the jagged rise and fall in bursts within his chest, but he cannot feel it, can’t feel the air entering him, mouth dry, he tastes whiskey but it doesn’t make sense.

“Winston!” he shouts. Shaking hands, numb, cast blindly into the darkness for his dog, for the wet nose and warm fur, and find only a tangle of soaked sheets, blankets snared around his legs from which he tries to kick violently free. There is nothing, no one, he is alone in this place, bleeding, he knows, he must be, too much, gasping -

"Will," the word sounds almost foreign, Will knows it's his name but surely, surely -

"Will, breathe for me, slow your breaths, listen to the rhythm of my voice, please, I'm right here."

He needs his dog, Will struggles harder, freeing his feet and scrambling but finding nothing still, no warm, furry body to touch, nothing but him, but cold sweat and unfamiliar darkness

and -

Hannibal has never seen an attack so violent before. Mischa always struggled but she never fought back, always caught in the tangled mess of memories like cobwebs against her face, choking reality from her and keeping her tethered to the past, but this is brutal, whatever Will is seeing is so stark Hannibal cannot break through it with his words alone.

But he doesn't stop trying.

Does not make the mistake of holding Will down against the bed, against himself to soothe his struggle. That would make it worse, cement a memory of being utterly trapped when he wants to free him.

"Will, please breathe for me, listen to my voice, this is Hannibal Lecter, do you remember me?"

Please remember…

Will convulses forward, shaking hands pressed to the sweat-soaked sheets, shivering as he drags himself forward onto his knees, slides to his hip and sits, trembling, drawn away from where Hannibal sits watching.

He feels his stomach heave, every muscle in his body snapped tight to a primal instinct - fight, flee, it hardly matters - fingers gripping the bed. Winston isn't here, isn't at his side as he was before, all the times before, again and again, always there, but Will lifts his eyes to the walls - papered in dark blues, not smeared with the symbols that even now Will feels burn behind his eyes.

His body shakes hard enough that Hannibal can feel it through the mattress from where Will sits frozen stiff at the foot of it, bare and pale and clammy-cold. He watches Will lift a hand to his shoulder, find the scar there and stare at his fingers, eyes distant, and wonders if he sees blood on them.

Will wipes it against his chest - wet, dripping but doesn't feel the coarse fibers of his vest or uniform, just bare skin. Sweat, then, rather than his own blood, he tells himself, swallowing dry and sinking slowly down against the bed to try and steady his breath.

Soft words ache into his folded arms, face buried against them, reminders of who he is, where he is, he isn't there in that house now, Winston is safe at home, he must be, he must be there, he's not been hurt, he isn't injured, they took him from Will, leashed him and removed him to attend to Will and the man bleeding out beside him, but Will was certain, so certain that it hadn't been enough, the man still had the knife -

"Fuck," Will hisses, the only word clear enough to be audible, but his heart won't slow, and his lungs won't fill, and his pulse is savage beneath his skin.

Hannibal directs his eyes to the door, ears trained as they are so used to to hearing Mischa. No movement from outside the door, no shuffling or twisting in bed, no scream. No sound of

Maggie frantically pacing, trained to lead Hannibal back to Mischa if what she herself does doesn't quite help her breathe.

Then he blinks, looks at Will again, shaking in bed, cold sweat a clear sheen over his back, face pressed partially into the pillow, lips parted to breathe.

For a moment, Hannibal does nothing but look, then he moves, onto his knees then forward further onto his stomach to rest flat against the bed next to Will, on his stomach.

He makes a sound, a soft thing but enough to force Will's eyes open to seek it, so he can see Hannibal before Hannibal reaches out for him, backs of his knuckles over his cheek, up to brush Will's hair from his face.

"Would you like some water?" Hannibal murmurs, no patronizing assurances that this is just a nightmare, no soft words to coax Will closer. "Or would you like to stay like this with me?"

Even seeing the movement, Will jerks away from Hannibal's touch, twists his head away from the hand that stills as soon as Will moves. He blinks, and Hannibal becomes the man leering at him, bullet holes sucking wet in his chest, blinks again and he is Hannibal, watching patient. Will pushes to sit up again, weight held on shaking arms.

"Don't," he snaps in a whisper, lungs catching only on hitches of air, the color drained from his face. "Don't touch me. I can't -"

He is everywhere at once - Louisiana, Baltimore, himself, not - and slings his feet to the floor, choking down a gasp as his feet find warm carpet rather than cold cement.

"I shouldn't have - fuck," Will breathes, forcing himself to stand, catching a hand back against the bed as the room spins dizzying around him.

Hannibal is up as well, keeping his distance as Will had demanded, but close enough to catch Will were he to fall. For a moment he says nothing, simply watches the man he is so used to seeing, fluid and warm and coy, turn into a tight shell of agony and fear.

It is harrowing.

It is something Hannibal sees far more often than he should.

He swallows, reaches to take up his boxers from the floor to slip back into. He does not move to dress Will or hand him his clothes. Instead, he makes his way to the bathroom and fills a glass with cool water there, before bringing it back and offering it to Will with an outstretched hand.

Will regards the water, glinting in the low lights, for a long moment and tries to shake the memory of how the knife flashed before him, into him. He drank too much, sleeping in a house other than his own, without Winston, and Will pushes a hand against his eyes. He should have known better, should have known that this would happen.

That things like this aren't meant for him.

That it’s dumb luck that he’s survived at all, when the blade could have easily slipped an inch higher.

He takes the water, shaking hard enough that it spills as he sips it, and hands it back.

“I have to go,” Will manages, his voice raw, rough from the shouts that he knows must have escaped, from those that choked in his throat.

His clothes are where he left them, a pile into which he slips unsteady, trembling.

Hannibal doesn’t stop him here either, does not plead or ask Will to stay. Instead he leaves the glass on the bedside table, turns on the large elaborate lamp there to illuminate the room better and takes up his cellphone.

A quick dial and soft words, explaining that he needed a cab to this address quickly, that the man taking the cab would provide the correct address for the driver himself.

It's all a transaction, fact, fact, fact, fact, no emotions where they could mar Will’s already unsteady world. Hannibal does note, though, how Will finishes the water when he’s dressed. Hannibal slips back into his slacks, takes his time with the belt to allow Will more time to gather himself.

"I'll walk you to the door," he offers gently. “The locks can be confusing if you don't know their pattern."

Will’s attention hardly leaves Hannibal for longer than an instant, some combination of lingering fear, wariness still ripped painfully tight through every muscle in his body, and quiet confusion. Not only the come-down of an attack, still filtering into his thoughts in fits and starts, but for the calm that pervades Hannibal, an inscrutable restraint.

Better than how others have reacted to Will in the past, he knows.

Because Hannibal has done this before.

Lives with this.

And now Will has simply added to it.

“I’m sorry,” Will finally mutters when they reach the door, unable to raise his eyes past the man’s shoulders before he turns to go, sweatshirt held against his chest even as he sweats cold through his shirt.

Hannibal says nothing, but he does not close the door until the cab pulls up and Will gets in it. He wishes he had asked Will to call him when he got home, just so Hannibal knew he was safe, that he had reached Winston and his other dogs, was safe at home and taking a day off work.

He considers calling Beverly and doesn’t, considers going into the shelter and decides against that as well.

When Hannibal returns to bed, he does not sleep, he cannot.

He changes the sheets, for want to give his hands something to do, and watches the light creep over the horizon as he lies under the blankets after, expression tired, limbs heavy.

He wonders if he could have done more, if he should have.

And then he forces his thoughts away, greets Mischa with breakfast in the kitchen, smiling past the pain that snags his throat and asks her about what school has in store for her today.

They talk, she eats, he drives her to school and returns to the empty house alone. He leaves for his lectures three hours early just to be around people again. He doesn't come home until later than he should, having called Mischa to ask her to get a ride with a friend while he caught up on more study. She had asked him what was wrong, he had lied and she had known.

The phone rings, a humming vibration against the wooden table and Will ignores it again, watching his dogs instead, meandering with delighted grins and lifted tails through the brush by his house.

He had called in, Bev had not teased, hearing the tone of his voice, had instead insisted on two days rest and comfort before leaving Will alone. Now, though, the phone rings a third time, and Will finally takes it up, eyes closed and with a sigh, and lets his caller speak first.

"Will."

Echoes of the last time he heard his name said by Hannibal - the purrs against his ear, breathless gasps, later softened with careful concern.

“I’m sorry I haven’t followed-up about Maggie’s next training,” Will finally responds, forcing his tone to a business-like stability. “I’ll have to check the calendar when I get back to the office, but I’d be happy to schedule something then if there’s not an appointment already.”

He bites his tongue to stop from adding that he’s going to send Beverly instead, feeling his brows draw in at the thought.

“If you need a date sooner, you can call the shelter and Bev can help you out.”

"I'm calling about you,” comes the reply, gentle, but again not at all patronizing, not the cloying tone people adopt when they know his history.

"I wanted to make sure you had gotten home safe, had some rest and something to eat." A pause, a soft breath, then, "How are the dogs?"

Will settles a hand against Winston’s head. He’s hardly left Will’s side since he got home that night, with scarcely strength enough to drag himself to the couch and collapse, and Will scratches softly behind his ears as reassurance.

For Winston. For himself.

“Fine,” he answers, and it sounds more curt than he means it to, eyes rolling up towards the grey sky, cold, but without the threat of rain. “They’re fine.”

The phone feels suddenly heavy, much as the weight in Will’s chest growing denser by the moment, and he realizes that it’s the first time anyone’s ever called him after this has happened. Only twice before, but Will - gratefully - never heard from them again, and it was after the second that Will decided against staying overnight anywhere with anyone, decided against seeking out more than the most perfunctory one-night stands, decided that he wasn’t meant for anything more serious than that.

“I’m fine,” Will adds, “and I’m sorry again. Thanks for calling.”

“Will.” Quick enough, before Will can hang up the phone and cut the ties, Hannibal knows that tone, he knows what it sounds like to be severed. He cannot let that happen with Will, he cannot. “I would like to see you again.”

This is met with silence, but, thankfully, no dial tone. Hannibal allows a breath, closes his eyes and keeps his breathing even, his headache at bay with a gentle rubbing of his fingers over the bridge of his nose.

“I owe you a date. I would like to take you out. When you have the time.”

Will curses himself silently. For not hanging up anyway, for letting it get this far in the first place. Curses his mind and the weakness of the body that holds it and curses that Hannibal’s words somehow hurt and heal all at once.

“Hannibal,” Will begins, and he feels the forced tone beginning to waver, softening despite himself. “You don’t have to do this. Really. You don’t owe me anything.”

“I never do things out of pity,” Hannibal responds, interrupting Will’s last statement to make sure he can still have him listen. “Pity kills more certainly and cruelly than indifference. Pity will kill a patient on the table, and it is not something I ever offer, to anyone.”

He draws a breath.

“I want to see you again.” He emphasizes the word, tone just as gentle, just as patient. “I am asking if you want to see me again.”

Of course, Will wants to answer. He sucks his lips between his teeth to stop himself from saying how much he’s missed him already, how desperately he wants to not be so broken, how much he’s wanted something - someone - just like this.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” he says instead, eyes closed, a hard swallow stuck in his throat. “You have enough to deal with already. School. Mischa. You don’t need this. You don’t want it. Trust me.”

Will draws his feet up into the patio chair, knees against his chest where he can rest his cheek against them.

“There’s - we haven’t even talked. Had a conversation beyond schedules, or fucking around. It’s okay,” Will interjects. “It’s okay because we had fun and it’s okay to leave it at that. We hardly even know each other.”

Hannibal swallows. He knows it’s true, that they fell into this without much thought beyond how good it felt, how much they both needed it and how now neither wanted to let it go.

But they haven’t talked. They haven’t discussed anything beyond Mischa, the dogs, Hannibal’s studies. Nothing. Shells and memories of warm hands and intoxicating kisses.

“You are allowed to let yourself live, Will.” Hannibal tells him, “With this. You deserve a life.”

He doesn’t know what else to say, what else he has the right to say. In truth he has the right to say nothing. Will is an adult, Will knows his condition, and himself, if he feels it would be better to let go then -

“It would please me very much to talk with you. In any capacity you will allow me. To know you, and let you know me in turn.” He hesitates. “Please think on it.”

And it is Hannibal who hangs up first. Presses the phone to his lips for a long moment until he allows himself to draw a breath and release it.

Will thinks on it.

For days.

And he keeps the phone buried in his desk at work, or tossed to slip between couch cushions. One day he forgets it - deliberately - at home, much to Bev’s annoyance, all so that he doesn’t reach for it in a moment of weakness.

Desperation, he tells himself.

“Loneliness.”

Will glances up from his desk, and returns his attention to insurance forms without turning to look over his shoulder.

“That’s what this is,” Bev tells him, breaking an entire morning of silence into which Will had settled comfortably. “You’re doing this to yourself.”

“Bev -”

“Avoidance,” she interjects, not unkindly.

His pen stills against the paper for a moment before continuing. “You’re not a therapist,” he reminds her. “And I didn’t ask.”

“You didn’t have to.” She wheels her chair around to rest in front of Will’s desk, curls her arms and rests her chin on top of Will’s paperwork so he has no choice but to listen. “I

remember you after the accident, Will, it was rough. You wouldn't talk about what happened, you wouldn't admit that anything had, you wouldn't admit that anything hadn't. You shut down. You refused to do anything but work through physical therapy and work with Winston."

Will says nothing, his jaw tenses and he deliberately avoids Bev's eyes. She doesn't force him to meet them.

"It took me over a year to get you to even talk to me. And you were fidgety and stressed. Not sleeping -"

"- it doesn't matter."

"It matters, Will." She sits up. "You remember how hard you fought me on setting this thing up?"

Will swallows. He had not wanted to do anything, driving himself crazy in his house with the dogs and no one else for company, nightmares and exhaustion and easy access to whiskey that he had barely avoided.

"You came alive when we opened Katz and Dogs, Will. You delighted in coming to work every day, in doing something, seeing people, working with the dogs, those that needed them."

She ducks her head and Will allows her one brief look before he looks away again.

"You come alive when you see Hannibal," she tells him.

He doesn't have to justify himself to her and he knows it, but the words linger and he can't let them go. Clicking his pen a little too hard against his desk, he spins in his chair to face her again.

"And I hadn't had an episode in months before that," answers Will, sharp. "I have a system. A stasis. I know what I need to do every day and I know where I go when I'm done. And I knew," he breathes, swallowing hard before a mirthless smile catches his lips. "I knew that this was a bad idea and I did it anyway."

He tosses his pen to the desk, ignoring it as it bounces to the floor and pushing a hand back through his hair.

"He doesn't need this. Distracting him from his own life, from taking care of her. The last thing he needs is someone else weighing him down, and I don't want to be that person," he tells her, forcing his tone to a false calm betrayed by the tension he can feel ratcheting up through his limbs.

"He thinks he wants it - I don't know, maybe he's got a savior complex or something," Will murmurs. "It isn't fair to either of them and I was fine before. I'll be fine again. You can go do her training and everything will go back to normal."

“You are a fucking idiot,” Bev murmurs, and when Will glares at her, he finds her expression not angry, not even upset, but entirely bemused. “How can you decide for him what he wants, Will?” she asks him gently. “That’s not your call. You don’t know shit about him.”

She holds her hand up as Will moves to protest.

“You don’t know shit about him beyond what his file says and how fucking ace he is in bed. And that’s a fairly basic knowledge, Kinsey Six, you have no idea how his mind works. You have no idea if he has a savior complex. You have no idea if he likes what he studies, no idea if he even sleeps at night when you’re not there, you don’t know.” Bev sighs, draws a hand through her hair, pushing it back into a sharp spiny bun that she settles with Will’s pen from the floor. “You need to stop trying to guess what you think Hannibal thinks he wants, and start thinking about what *you* want.”

Will watches the back of her head as she turns back towards her own desk. It’s a permission he could grant himself, he knows, having heard it granted by her first - an allowance to have a life, rather than to merely exist. The thought pulls at him, the single missed call since the last time they spoke, yet unreturned, no voicemail attached to it.

It aches, like drowning, in his ribs to think of what it must have taken for Hannibal to try again, despite Will’s curt rebuff. He can see the man clear as day, driven out onto the quad from his classes, mustering up the wherewithal to dial Will’s number, to let it ring, to hang up when there was no answer.

“I don’t even know him,” Will finally responds, and he can feel the pull in his chest manifest in his voice.

Loneliness.

“You’re right,” she agrees. “You don’t.”

“He doesn’t know me.”

“He knows this about you,” she suggests with a shrug. “And he still wants to see you.”

Will reaches to snag his pen back from Bev’s hair, letting it cascade back across her shoulders, and she finally turns to him, watching him over her shoulder.

“And,” she adds, “I’m not taking the appointment.”

He blinks at her, twice, and shakes his head. “Bev, seriously -”

“Nope.”

“Seriously.”

“*Seriously*,” she answers, “I’m not. She’s your student, not mine, and I’m not letting you shrug that off, no matter how fucking stubborn you are.”

Will stares at her a moment more, before shaking his head and tilting back towards his desk. He sprawls across the paperwork, arm tucked beneath his cheek, and digs his phone out of the drawer where he threw it that morning.

“Is there a word for being preemptively embarrassed, in anticipation of doing something embarrassing?” Will asks, tapping a finger absently against the darkened screen.

Bev snorts. “Yeah, pretty sure that's called 'a waste of time'.”

Will drags himself back off the desk, phone stuffed into his pocket, and shuffles out to the front of the store. There’s a bench on the sidewalk, bowls of water beside it for people walking their dogs, and Will slumps into it and dials.

The phone is answered on the fourth ring, and Hannibal sounds almost concerned, though he gives nothing away beyond his usual -

“Will.” A sigh, and Will can feel the smile in the next words and it snares at him a little tighter. “It’s good to hear from you.”

He can’t resist smiling a little himself, softening the edges of his voice. “It’s good to be heard,” Will answers, cradling the phone closer. “And it’s good to hear you, too.”

Good is an understatement. It’s a pleasure that nearly drives Will from the bench again, electric through him. Relief that Hannibal answered, relief that Hannibal sounds so glad to hear from him, relief that aches through the sigh Will tries to keep to himself but he knows carries through the phone.

“How have you been?” asks Will. He stops himself from directing the conversation safely towards Mischa, Maggie, classes, work, and lets it hang as intended - to hear about Hannibal, to listen rather than guide.

“In truth?” A soft laugh from Hannibal, directed at himself. “I’m very glad you called.”

He lets that settle, lets the words warm Will and soothe him, before Hannibal continues, voice rich and warm as Will remembers it being.

“I am preparing for several scholarship exams,” he admits. “Just something to ease the spending from the money willed us, for a time. You caught me in a good time, my last is two days from now and after that my workload will ease significantly.”

The implication is clear, that he wants Will to come with him, wants Will to accept his offer of a night out, just the two of them, to talk, to get to know each other without the pressure of Will’s work or the empty house to get in the way.

“I hope you’ve been keeping well,” Hannibal adds softly.

“I’ve been keeping,” Will responds. He rubs a hand over his face and lets it fall into his lap again. “That’s the most I can say about it, really.”

“Not unwell, then,” asks Hannibal, and Will hums.

“No. Neither. I’ve just *been*.” Drawing a breath, Will lets it hold in his lungs until the silence burns, and then lets it all out at once. “I’m sorry again for what happened.”

“There’s no need to be.”

“There is,” Will insists. “Not just the episode. I mean not answering you. Answering for you. Avoiding you. All of it. Fuck,” he sighs, finally driven to stand and pace to the curb.

“It is not my place to make choices for you, Will,” Hannibal tells him. “Not my right. I had hoped you would answer. I had hoped you would call, but I would not have pushed. I am glad to hear you, very glad you called me.”

And Will hears that smile again, stops to dig his toe into the grass that grows against the curb before sighing and tilting his head up to look at the sky.

“I should apologize for what happened that evening,” Hannibal continues. “I had not thought that something could trigger you, it had not occurred to me that you would need Winston, I had not thought ahead.” Hannibal swallows. “I wish I had known how to act. I have helped Mischa before but…”

Another laugh, very soft, nervous. “I suppose if we both apologize nothing will change. The episode happened, it was traumatic, but preventable. We will both know better in the future. May I ask, instead, if you would like to join me for the evening on Friday?”

An apology already perched on his lips, Will echoes the laugh instead and reseats himself on the curb, knees drawn to his chest and arm folded over them. He rests his forehead against it, closes his eyes, and sighs, grateful for the change of conversation, the ease of Hannibal’s willingness to let it go.

Grateful for the second chance, in spite of everything.

“For dinner,” he asks, the implication clear, “or a date?”

“For a date,” Hannibal confirms, and in the pause that follows Will can imagine he smiles again, perhaps turns away from where he’s standing, checking to make sure no one can hear him despite his words being entirely innocent to onlookers. “If dinner happens to be involved it would be entirely your choice of cuisine.”

Will grins, hidden into his arm, and feels his cheeks warm. “You have a devious way with words, doctor,” he answers, and then corrects himself, amused. “Almost-doctor.” He stretches his legs out again, to relieve the ache in them, days of tension so quickly removed that he’s glad to feel that soreness settle in.

“A date then,” Will agrees. “Maybe dinner. Two dinners. Maybe. To celebrate passing your tests.”

Another soft laugh through the phone that twists Will’s stomach pleasantly.

“That means you’d better pass them,” he adds, pleased.

Hannibal hums agreement, and for a moment neither speak, and, oddly, neither have to. There is a strange comfort in the silence that comes from being around someone you trust, who calms you, without saying anything at all.

“I will see you on Friday, Will,” Hannibal says finally, a warm, comfortable thing. “Be well.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> "Shit.” Will swallows. Closes his eyes. Takes a breath. Opens them. “I mean. Hi. Doctor Lecter. Not... not-yet doctor. Lecter. Hannibal. Hi."
>
> The smile he receives is warm, though small, and entirely gentle, and despite Will’s persistent cloying nausea regarding this entire situation he finds that it starts to relax him.
>
> "I have missed your eloquence," Hannibal replies.

Chapter Notes

> Also, we have the first volume of our Soundtrack for Rescues up as well! Have a listen, tell us what you think :3

Will lets Hannibal choose the restaurant.

He’s grateful when he gets there and sees that while the restaurant is small, the food itself is not, no tiny servings on enormous plates, a relief after having spent an unreasonable part of the day in dismay that Hannibal *definitely* chose someplace inordinately fancy and Will’s going straight from work so he’s going to be in whatever he wears for work but he also brought a sweater that’s a little nicer but he’s going to smell like dog and should he drive home first and then go but it’s so far out and what if he hits traffic and he’s late and -

Bev had finally smothered him with both hands pressed against his mouth, eyes wide with a desperate plea to just *shut up, Graham, holy hell* and a reminder that Hannibal invited Will to see Will, not to trick him into using the wrong fork.

Will isn’t wholly convinced of it, but he takes a deep breath and lets the autumn chill go warm in his lungs before finally sighing it out again and tucking a hand into his pocket to retrieve his phone.

“*Eleven?*” sighs Will, some small degree of relief in his slump against the car seat to see that the messages are all from Bev.

Beverly: okay Graham
Beverly: first if you’re reading this while he is there put your fucking phone away

Beverly: second if you're reading this before he's there trust me you look fine just try to keep your hair out of your face

He blinks, and adjusts the collar of the crimson sweater against his neck with a nervous finger, before he runs his hand back through his hair. It falls right back into his eyes and he squints past it, scrolling.

Beverly: I must have been insane (or really just want you to work this out GRAHAM) to have volunteered for this
Beverly: I don't even like kids
Beverly: then again I basically babysit you all day anyway so

A disapproving twist catches Will's mouth, but he continues.

Beverly: just remember that
Beverly: he likes you a lot
Beverly: and you like him
Beverly: (maybe leave out the lumberjack talk this time)
Beverly: (but do it later anyway)

Will types back a quick message - *I don't know which of us has a more daunting night - good luck* - and has only just hit send when he draws up straight, breath held and shoulders back, as Hannibal pulls his car in to park.

He watches the man get out, dressed in another pristine suit, and runs his hand through his hair again, finding the effort as futile as it had been the first time. Outside of the car, Hannibal leans against the door, phone in hand and frowning, and Will already has seven - no... no, eight - awful theories as to why and how he has made the man unhappy.

Before he's even seen him.

Hannibal takes a step from the car, stops, frowns deeper before sighing and turning back. Will lets his head drop back against the seat with a quick sigh and a familiar tightness in his chest.

Well, he had come, at least. It's more effort than Will has made before. He's surprised Hannibal came this far at all. Maybe he finally realized that this won't work and he doesn't want it after all, maybe he finally sees that -

"Will."

Will jerks so hard from his thoughts he nearly hits the horn, laughing nervously as he winds his window down further and looks at Hannibal there. Still in his suit, but no longer in his tie. And his hair isn't gelled back as it had been when he had stepped from his car. And the top buttons on his shirt are undone enough that Will can see the shadow of hair there and it just -

"Shit." Will swallows. Closes his eyes. Takes a breath. Opens them. "I mean. Hi. Doctor Lecter. Not... not-yet doctor. Lecter. Hannibal. Hi."

The smile he receives is warm, though small, and entirely gentle, and despite Will's persistent cloying nausea regarding this entire situation he finds that it starts to relax him.

"I have missed your eloquence," Hannibal replies, and this, too, is such a gentle teasing, entirely free from malice and cruelty. Hannibal directs his eyes to Will's sweater, and the thought process Will had just experienced repeats itself on the other man's face. A gentle bite to his lip and Hannibal looks up again. "It's very good to see you. Shall we go in?"

It's an entirely innocent statement, but Will feels his cheeks grow hot at even the distant innuendo onto which his thoughts grab hold. Forcing himself to think of something - anything - other than just bending Hannibal over the hood of his car, he reminds himself with a thought that sounds alarmingly like Beverly that he's - they're - here not just to rendezvous for rutting. A key reason, in fact, they're out at a restaurant at all, rather than attempting - and failing at eating - another dinner at Hannibal's house.

"Yeah," Will finally replies, wry. "The waiter might have trouble finding us out here."

He slips out of the car, checks the lock twice behind himself, and stands for a moment between the door and Hannibal. The man's mouth is curved into the faintest traces of a smile, still, despite the body-language that Will couldn't help but read with alarm before. Will's hands braced back against the window, he leans forward, up slightly onto his toes, and touches a kiss to the corner of Hannibal's mouth before edging past him.

Will can hardly afford thought to studying the restaurant around them, with Hannibal so near behind him, but manages still the cursory glance that he can't help but perform. A quick once-over to take stock of who is there, how and where they're sitting, doors and windows, an old habit burnt deep into his synapses that he hasn't ever been able to shake.

It's better to be aware than to be caught off-guard, he's always reasoned, and he is grateful when Hannibal does not comment on - or appear to notice at all - the furtive looks.

Will wonders if it's too soon to decide this isn't working, and settles into his chair instead.

"Nice place," he finally mutters, a flush of embarrassment still creeping scarlet across his cheeks.

Hannibal undoes one button on his jacket but doesn't remove it before sitting down opposite Will. His pocket vibrates with another message and with a sigh and a gentle gesture imploring Will to excuse him, Hannibal checks the screen.

Mischa: Did you pull out the chair for him? I hope you did. You're on a date.

Hannibal sighs, a huff of air in an amused exhale, and shakes his head before setting his phone away, even when he immediately feels it vibrate again.

"I came here once with one of my classes," Hannibal tells him. "One of the few places where food is plated to be eaten, not to be seen, in this part of the city."

A gentle jest, and Hannibal can see Will smiling, or fighting the need to - unsuccessfully - before he ducks his own head and finally sits back in his seat properly, shoulders just barely slouched, mirroring Will to make him feel more comfortable.

He watches Will adjust his position in all too familiar a way and smiles a little more.

"Perhaps our phones should take the evening off," Hannibal suggests, retrieving his from his pocket once more, ignoring the three new messages on it as he sets it to full silent mode and turns to show Will. "I want to spend the evening with you. Though my keeper seems convinced I need a guidebook to dating."

Will grins, sudden and bright, catching it behind his hand and rubbing against the soft scruff on his jaw. “Yours too?” he says, leaning back a little to remove his own phone from his pocket. “I have six unread. Five less than last time I checked, at least.” A few taps to stop the incessant hum of the thing, and he slips it back into his pocket.

He glances over the menu with little interest, stomach knotted up in a not entirely unpleasant way, but enough that the idea of eating isn’t especially pressing.

“Christ, I probably need it,” he muses. “I’m not even sure I remember the last time I went out on an actual *date*.”

This is a lie. Will remembers perfectly well the last time he went on a date, or wanted to, anyway. They’d been sleeping together for a while, enjoyed it enough that Will - in a rare moment of whimsy - suggested that maybe they go out for the night instead. A movie, dinner, a walk, anything beyond just being pulled quickly into the man’s apartment and pinned to the door.

He had guessed something was up before that, from the quick looks down the hallway after tugging Will inside, the questions every time he arrived - *did anyone see you, was there anyone else in the elevator* - and shouldn’t have been surprised that the idea of being out in public together would be regarded with a wild-eyed disbelief.

But then people would see me with you.

It didn’t take much more than that for Will to realize he wasn’t the only person the man was involved with.

What he hadn’t guessed was that the other was his wife, in the suburbs, with a house and kids.

“Tea, please, if you have it,” Will orders, a bashful look shared across the table as he bypasses wine or coffee in favor of something a little gentler. A little less likely to stir the parts of himself that flared to life the last time he saw Hannibal.

Hannibal orders the same and sets his hands against his lap, comfortably splayed, allows himself to take Will in properly, even as he sits fidgeting and attempting to dissuade himself from doing just that. He wonders what Will is thinking about, what has him so riled beyond the fact that they are out in public, together, having dinner after work.

“I’ve wanted to tell you for a while,” he ventures at length, “that my respect for anyone who takes care of animals has risen tenfold since owning a dog.”

Work. A safe topic, and one that Hannibal knows Will can at least talk about without wondering if he had done enough research to appear smart enough. It’s one of the frustrating things that Hannibal had found when he had dated last, that people would go out of their way to talk to Hannibal about fantastically complicated things, simply to show they could, simply to prove they were at a level that he apparently wanted them to be.

He supposes it is a lot to ask for people to be genuine, when it is so hard to muster up the courage to find oneself worthy of another when one has already set them on a pedestal.

Will’s brows raise and he grins a little, hidden behind his tea. “Thank you,” he responds, entirely genuine in accepting the compliment, pleased to have his work - this work - recognized. A slow sip, watching Hannibal - tall and tailored and *god he’s fucking handsome* - before settling back, shoulders straight, with his hands against his legs.

“Maggie’s not too much of a handful?” he asks. “Beyond the usual - ah - duties, involved?”

Before Hannibal can answer, Will’s eyes widen.

“Your tests. You had tests,” he exclaims softly, ignoring the voice - that still sounds persistently like Bev - that tells him to stop talking about work, school, the same safe subjects they always gloss over. It’s entirely earnest, the enthusiasm, the eagerness to know. “How did they go?”

A laugh, quiet, and Hannibal shrugs.

“I’ve been told I am a very stoic test taker.” he admits, amused, “I will go into an examination with my mind filled with details and write essays where they require a paragraph. I can only hope my enthusiasm is taken for what it is.”

He takes up his menu and gives it a very quick glance, not hungry himself but determined to stay until Will shows indication of wanting to leave.

“I always fear I will not pass.”

“Have you ever failed?” Will asks, head tilted, hands against his cup as Hannibal’s lips work to soothe a grin down to something softer.

“I have not.”

“That’s why you always fear it. You should try it some time,” murmurs Will, an impish glint in his eyes. “It would be good for you.”

“Less so for my studies.”

Will shrugs, smiles a little, head tilted towards the side in consideration. “It’s not the end of the world, or your grades. There’s allowances for it. And once you’ve done it, you realize it’s not as catastrophic as you thought it would be.”

He pauses, ruminates for a moment, and then grins, abashed. “Although maybe that just makes it easier to do in the future. That’s my excuse, anyway.”

Hannibal regards him before directing his eyes away, smile still present though his lips are pursed in apparent displeasure. Will wonders if this is the expression Hannibal wears when Mischa disagrees with one of his more steadfast rules.

“There is some logic to your illogic, I will admit,” he murmurs, orders a salad when the waiter returns to ask them if they’re ready. Then he leans forward, fingers threaded together.

“One fears what one does not understand or practice. There is a reason I can’t stop calculating the probability of every single thing going wrong this evening.”

His eyes narrow in pleasure.

“And then I look at you in that ravishing sweater and I forget to try.”

Will blinks, lips parted in surprise, just long enough to revel in the way his heart stutters faster at the words.

And then he laughs, a lovely, lilting note, before clapping his hand over his mouth to stop it a moment too late.

“Oh,” he breathes, shaking his head and straightening his expression - unable to smooth the lift in the corners of his lips. “Oh, no. I - I’m sorry. No. That was. I didn’t mean to laugh. I mean, I meant to, but not,” he pauses, takes a deep breath, and nearly as scarlet as his sweater, speaks more slowly. “I am not very good with compliments,” he responds, amusement lingering, “especially about a sweater that I’ve had since I was, actually, failing tests in school.”

Something loosens in Will, though, a settling in his shoulders, across his hands that splay comfortably over the tablecloth. “Thank you, though,” he responds. “For saying that. And for making me feel better about doing the same thing. But it’s - it’s not bad, really. Is it? It’s not bad.”

Hannibal shakes his head, amused.

“Perhaps merely something we need practice in,” he reassures gently.

“Not my most graceful moment,” Hannibal admits, unable to hide his own laugh as he watches Will shake with it. Around them the restaurant is filling up, as the evening grows later and people arrive to enjoy their well-earned end-of-the-week dinner out.

It’s warm, comfortable, and - miraculously perhaps - they have both managed to make it to dessert. Hannibal’s creme brulee sits partially eaten, though Will has masterfully made it entirely through his own.

“It is,” Will takes a breath, bites his lip to ground himself before trying again, “very difficult to imagine you falling down stairs,” he admits. Hannibal merely blinks.

“From the top tier of seats in my anatomy lecture,” he reminds Will seriously, and Will can’t help but laugh again, eyes bright with it and cheeks flushed in the most beautiful way. Hannibal can’t help but think how young he looks, when he doesn’t wear the weight of his fears, how beautiful always but here more so.

He wants to make Will laugh like this as often as he can.

It’s only when impatient looks from the waitstaff are noticed that Will hums a little, the easing of laughter into a ready smile, a little shy still, but lacking entirely the tension that ratcheted through him when they first arrived and stumbled awkward into conversation.

“I think we’re taking up space here,” Will murmurs, conspiratorial. “Watch, he’ll come back over and ask if there’s anything else we’d like.”

As if on cue, their waiter breaks from his station and approaches, asks the same question Will predicted, and it’s all Will can do not to laugh again.

“No, I -” he hesitates, catches the encouraging look from Hannibal, and waves his hand a little. “I think we’re good. Very good. Both of us. Excellent, probably.”

The waiter regards him, perplexed, before Will adds, “The check. We’ll take the check.”

It’s a word that tastes sweeter than Will would have expected - *we*, *us*, plurals and their promises - and as their waiter gratefully departs, Will holds his bottom lip between his teeth, fingers tracing the rings his tea has left on the tablecloth.

“You probably have to get home,” he notes, without bothering to hide his reluctance that the evening has to end, so soon after it feels like it began.

Hannibal’s eyes narrow briefly and he manages to slide the check over before Will can take it, setting his card against it and writing down the tip before handing it to their server.

“If I were to go home, I would be facing at best an empty house and a sleeping sibling. At worst, a sleeping sibling and an endless flood of questions from your colleague regarding how well our date went and -”

Hannibal licks his lips, parts them, smiles.

“It would be a shame to bring her incomplete information.” He accepts his card with a smile and returns it to his wallet with a very victorious smile when Will blushes, knowing he had paid for their dinner fully, deliberately.

“I find myself wanting to delay returning, as long as I can,” he finishes, folds his arms against the side of the table comfortably and leans forward. “But you have the dogs, they will be missing you. I will walk you to your car.”

There is a tilt to his tone that Will knows, has heard before, and it makes him shiver, mind fluttering back to thoughts he had - unsuccessfully - been trying to avoid all evening.

He stands, follows close enough behind Hannibal as they go, nearly enough to lean a shoulder against him, considering it, resisting, a delightful rush of anticipation in the game of Will resisting his own impulses to simply twine his arm through Hannibal's and press tightly together.

All too quickly, they are there, between their cars, parking lot lights burning copper overhead against the clear night sky, and Will finds he can breathe no easier for being outside again. Less so, perhaps, than he could with the table keeping them safely at distance from each other.

"This is your car?" Will asks, taking in the length of the English auto, expensive and shined to perfection. Hannibal watches only Will, the curiosity of his expression, and eases as Will adds with a snort, teasing, "Kind of a lot for a student, isn't it? Ostentatious."

A click of his tongue and Hannibal tilts his head, hands casually in his pockets now, jacket done carefully back up.

"And I was going to so generously offer you a drive. I believe I've changed my mind, on being so generous."

His eyes are narrowed in delightful mischief, and he waits, patient, just waits, watching Will's cheeks flood with color again, resisting as he had all night the urge to reach out and touch him, pull him close, bring their lips together…

Will's grin widens and he ducks his head, regarding the car - regarding Hannibal. He stifles it to a look of feigned consideration, as though weighing his options, and then pushes a hand back through his hair, leaning back against his own car, parked beside Hannibal's much - much - nicer vehicle.

"Where would we go? If you felt like being generous, I mean."

Hannibal hums, moves to mirror Will's position and lean back against his own car, crossing his feet at the ankles as he leaves himself entirely open to Will, loose and comfortable after a good night together.

"Truth?" he says at length, allows his eyes to linger on Will as Will's take him in, reclining as he is.

"Try me."

"I would go as far as my patience would last before I had to kiss you."

Will's lips purse, a smile peeking through what he can't suppress to maintain his poker face, and he pushes forward off his car again, a step, another, to come so close and not yet touch.

"It's a bit of a drive to my place," Will cautions. "If you're giving me a ride, I mean." He lifts his eyes, watches as Hannibal's lips part so slightly that the man may not even realize he does

it.

“Then again,” he adds, “you’ve never failed a test before.”

Hannibal’s smile remains small, eyes taking in Will’s face, so close now that he would barely need to reach to touch him. Considers his words. Considers the evening.

Will’s curls are soft between his fingers, and he doesn’t let him say anything more before kissing a sigh from him, closing his eyes to relish the softness of the man against him, the familiarity that he had missed more - he now knows - than he had realized.

“I’m rethinking my stance on failure,” he murmurs against Will’s lips, smiling as he tilts his head to kiss him again, soft, chaste, “Perhaps it is good for me.”

Hands softly framing Hannibal’s face, Will leans up and with a grin, brushes his nose alongside Hannibal’s. Another small kiss, another, simple sweet things without urgency or hunger, reveling in the nearness for its own sake. It’s hardly been any time at all apart, in the grand scheme of things, but Will sighs his relief, tangible in the way his body loosens and sinks heavy against Hannibal’s own.

“Makes it easier to fail in the future,” he reminds him, an amused murmur, “when you realize there’s much worse things than failing.”

He runs his fingers along Hannibal’s arms as they share another lingering kiss, mindless of others going to their cars, mindless of the autumn night grown cold since the sun set, mindless of anything but the warmth finally found again that chases away a far more bitter chill. Will catches Hannibal’s hands in his own, pressing them against his cheeks, turning against one to crush a kiss against his palm.

“Take me,” Will decides, cheeks blooming hot beneath Hannibal’s hands, and a grin dawning as he adds, “Shit, I’m going to owe Bev a lifetime of favors for this.”

“What a tempting request,” Hannibal sighs, eyes hooded as he watches Will, there, close and loose and comfortable with him, inordinately pleased that he asked himself, that Hannibal would not need to return home to doubts of his own planning, of whether or not the entire night was forced or coaxed and entirely out of Will’s control.

No.

Now it could quite easily be entirely out of Hannibal’s, if Will continues pressing as close as he does, nuzzling and kissing him and reminding Hannibal of every gloriously pleasant thing he has replayed over and over in his mind since the last time they had been together.

“I suppose you’d better call her,” he murmurs, reluctant to let go of Will now that he has him, but he does bring his hand to his pocket again, unlocks the car and slides across the surface of it to be able to work open the passenger door for Will, with a smile.

“Very graceful,” Will teases, removing his phone from his pocket and staring momentarily aghast at the amount of texts he’s received. He hesitates, considering making the call outside,

but it's too far already, too much space between himself and Hannibal when moments ago they had been so close, and he drops into the seat with a slight smile, before dialing Bev.

"Graham. Why are you calling. What are you doing. Tell me everything."

He blinks a few times, drawing a breath and puffing it up towards his hair as the car rumbles pleasantly to life. He starts to answer, but hesitates, turning to Hannibal instead.

"Are these seats heated?"

Hannibal hums acknowledgement, and Will settles deeper into it, a comfortable slouch that rides his sweater up to bare an inch or so of stomach. He doesn't correct it.

"Sorry, Bev -"

"Heated seats, huh?"

"Yeah," Will answers, pressing a hand over his face, muffled into the phone. "How's it going?"

"It's going."

"Going… well?"

There's a shuffling sound and Bev turns away to say something Will can't quite make out.

"Kid's kicking my ass at chess right now," Bev complains, and Will can't help but laugh.

"She's twelve."

"Shut up."

"You suck."

"Oh alright, Magnus Carlsen, very funny. Why are you calling me. You're on a date. Don't call me on your date, you're doing it wrong."

"I have twenty-nine messages from you."

"Yes."

"On my date."

"Yeah?"

"That I shouldn't be calling - whatever. Just… we're going to mine."

"Yours? Wait, we… *are you about to get laid??*"

The words are so loud Will holds the receiver away from his ear and watches, cheeks heating, as Hannibal's lips work as though he had not heard.

“I am about to go home,” Will confirms, pauses, “with company. Uh. Can you… hold the fort a bit longer?”

“How much longer?” Bev would be standing now if she had been sitting, Will knows, excited and grinning.

Will glances towards Hannibal, chewing his lip for a moment before settling his head against the window, turned just so, to watch him - sly, subtle little glances.

“It might be a while.”

“Oh ho. How long of a while?”

He sighs, brows raising beneath his hair. “A long one.”

“You live out in the middle of buttfu-... nowhere,” she corrects. “He’s not coming back tonight, is he?”

“Maybe not.”

“Maybe you owe me.”

A longer sigh now, vocal, more of a groan really, but with a widening smile. “I knew you were going to say that.”

“Big time. And her. Both of us. I think you should take both of us out.”

“What?” laughs Will. “For what? Wait -”

“Oh, is that the time?” she answers, distracted. “I should probably get going home -”

“Fine. Fine. Both of you. God. Now to find a place that serves whiskey *and* ice cream.”

“I can have whiskey ice cream!” This, hollered at the phone from a much younger voice. Will laughs, Bev cackles.

“Damn straight, kid.”

“Tell Hannibal to be nice to Will.”

Bev snorts. “You heard her.”

Will hesitates, chews his lip before shifting the phone a little, and directing his voice towards Hannibal.

“Your sister requests you be kind to me.”

Hannibal hums. “It will be set under consideration,” he deadpans, eyes flicking to Will before returning to the road.

“She also wishes for whiskey ice cream.”

“Wishes are healthy.”

Will laughs, returns the phone to where he’d held it before.

“I owe you,” he agrees. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah, you know it.”

She hangs up before Will can, and he sets the phone back to his pocket, shifts to further face Hannibal as he drives.

“I think she just asked if I’m getting laid in front of your sister,” Will remarks, rueful. “Just in case you hear it from her and need someone to blame. It wasn’t me.”

He draws his knee up against his chest, careful not to put his feet against the seats that he presumes to cost more alone than his entire car, twisted comfortably small so that his back is against the door. Content to watch Hannibal, to enjoy the quiet, the familiar comfort that only settles so warmly into his body - easing its tensions - when they’re together.

“I’m glad you asked me out. More than once,” adds Will, pushing a hand back through his hair and resting his elbow against his knee. “That you didn’t write me off, for what happened.” A pause, and he snorts softly. “Or for being an asshole about it.”

Hannibal allows another brief glance from the road, expression back to the warm gentleness with which he had greeted Will at the start of the night. Carefully he reaches out to draw his knuckles over Will’s hand before taking it and holding it between them as he continues to drive.

“I’m glad you allowed me to make it up to you.” he admits, stroking Will’s knuckles gently as he keeps the car steady on the highway, nearly empty with the lateness of the hour, few people returning home now, or going out - that time had passed, people were either comfortable at home or enjoying their bars and clubs for the rest of the night.

“And you were cautious, I cannot fault you that, nor will I.”

Will chews his lip for a moment, watching their hands together. He spreads his fingers, watches as Hannibal does the same, mirroring the other with palms pressed before closing their fingers softly together again.

“It might happen again. I mean,” he sighs, nose wrinkling. “I mean, I hope it doesn’t. It was a long time before that. I just don’t always get a wake-up call about it, you know? Until it’s already happening. I’m glad I -” Will draws a breath, sighs it out curt. “I’m glad it wasn’t worse. That’s all. But you should know, I mean -”

“Will.” It is a gentle disruption, as kind as an interruption can be, and Will watches him, the glow of street lamps striping bright across his features.

“Just saying,” Will finishes, content to have said his piece for now, moreso when Hannibal squeezes his hand with the suggestion of a smile playing just beneath his eyes.

The house glows in the dark distance, automatic lights burning bright across the fields that surround it, grasses like waves beneath the stiff wind that rustles them, up into the pines that spread far, far in every direction. Will's stomach tenses pleasurably, smile widening into another youthful grin.

"Watch this," he declares, slipping out of the car no sooner than it's stopped and jogging up to the house. He calls out, laughing pleased, and takes the steps two at a time to click through the locks - many, too many - and fling open the doors.

"Go! Be free!"

It is an explosion of fur, all colors all lengths, on all sizes of creatures. And Hannibal watches as the dogs whine and jump and nudge against their owner, welcoming him home before streaking out into the night with joyful barks and wagging tails. Hannibal notes that Winston stays close, tail swaying, tongue lolling, resting his weight against Will's leg until Will clicks his tongue and sends him after the others, stroking behind his ears as he goes.

Hannibal can't help but smile, walking closer and enveloping Will in his arms, back to chest, so they can both watch the dogs where the light still catches them, just before the tree line, some tall enough to be seen in the grass.

"That," he murmurs, pressing his lips against Will's temples with a laugh, "is a lot of dogs, Will."

"Not enough dogs."

"Quite enough dogs."

"Never enough."

Hannibal catches the corner of his mouth to kiss and grins when Will turns in his arms to kiss him properly, curling his arms beneath Will's to rest his palms against his shoulders, holding him close.

"Are you going to invite me in?" he asks, amused, eyes open just enough to see Will.

"Would you like to come in, not-yet doctor?" Will grins against Hannibal's cheek, lips closing against his, again, again, never enough, as he walks Hannibal backwards towards the porch. A laugh, small and utterly enthralled, as Hannibal ascends them effortlessly, before turning Will to walk him backwards into the house in turn.

It is small, humble, repaired from the ramshackle mess that Will first bought. Transformed into something comfortable, safe, a piano in the corner and pale green walls and his bed, stationed curiously in the living room rather than the would-be bedroom Hannibal can see further back. Will reaches out blind, joined in a humming eager kiss again, to flick on the lights, tugging free of Hannibal's mouth only to shed his sweater off over his head.

Unreserved, unabashed, Will pushes into another kiss, arms wrapped around Hannibal's shoulders until the bed comes up behind the knees of the taller man. Will draws apart

laughing, heart racing, and cups Hannibal's cheeks in his hands.

He doesn't apologize for the house, though it pales in compare to the splendor of Hannibal's own, nor for the dogs, nor for the bed unmade beneath him but to murmur, "I've never had anyone here, for this. Like this. Ever."

“Neither had I,” Hannibal responds, soft, smiling, eyes down to watch Will’s lips gently press together and part before they smile again. “In my home. Always elsewhere.”

Hannibal sits back comfortably before sliding his hands lower around Will, to grasp him by his thighs and yank him closer, catching himself back against the mattress with one hand as his other holds Will steady, delighting in his laugh, soft and warm, here, with nothing to show off and no one to do it for.

Hannibal supposes that Will considers him having seen him at his worst, so the rest was not worth hiding, not worth the energy to pretend to apologize for when he was obviously comfortable in his home, his life here. Hannibal wants him no other way.

“I very much like seeing you there, though,” he hums, obliging and kissing Will again, letting his eyes slip closed, letting himself feel the weight of Will above him, easily held with one arm, supported by another. They fit well.

There’s no furious drive as there has been before to bare himself, to bare Hannibal, and Will’s fingers work easy the buttons of Hannibal’s coat and shirt, revealing him in wonderful inches, one after the next.

“I very much like seeing you here,” answers Will, a huff of laughter caught beneath Hannibal’s jaw where his lips press in turn. The shirt open, Will runs it slowly off one shoulder, then the other, and works his fingers through the curls of hair beneath. Ducking his head, he gathers his lips against them in a kiss, that spot that Hannibal revealed with a button undone and his tie removed, that has so deliciously tormented Will’s imagination throughout the night.

He slides from on top of him, dropping heavy onto his side, and sinks his arms and legs around Hannibal to tug him near, on their sides, half-bared, and so fully content to be so that Will’s hands stray no further than the man’s back, spreading to feel the broad warmth beneath them as they kiss.

Will wriggles closer, a little, and then a little more when Hannibal tugs him near, until they’re pressed chest to chest, hips to hips, a tangle of limbs and lips and breath and little grins shared as though privy to a secret that no one but them knows.

“I feel like,” Will begins, a little laugh as he twists away from another kiss to steal away his words, lets it fall against his cheek instead. “I feel like I should ask you on a date,” he echoes, smoothing Hannibal’s hair back from his face where it has fallen untidy and lovely into his eyes.

Hannibal hums, narrows his eyes in consideration, purses his lips as though the decision is one he has to genuinely think about.

"I think," Hannibal draws his fingers through Will's hair, turns to run his knuckles down his face after in a soft caress, "that I would very much like to go on a date with you, Will Graham."

It's silly. Ridiculous. Despite the idea of this entire evening being that they talk, grow to know each other, they had spoken of nothing in particular and everything at all. And it seems enough, to Hannibal, that he knows what makes Will laugh, what makes him nervous and fidgety and what sends him into a meditative quiet as he considers his answers.

He knows Will as one grows to know the turns of phrase in a favorite book. Perhaps that knowledge is far more intimate, needed for them both, than a set list of facts to recite back later.

They are happy, together, their burdens shed with every careful touch and tender kiss and slight shift to bring their bodies as close together as they can be. Will's shoulders, drawn so high and tight throughout his daily life, are limber now, no hesitation in his gestures when he pushes his fingers against Hannibal's cheeks, no resistance to the little laughs that fall so easily between their kisses as they adjust, settle, and find their place pressed perfectly against the other.

Hannibal is warmer than Will could have imagined - for all his skill in doing so - from the first time he met the man who can so readily raise himself lofty and distant, proud and untouchable. Will wonders how many truly ever get to see beyond the facade he erects, ensconced in tailored suits and stern looks, to the tenderness that lies beneath.

Will wonders if Hannibal sees him the same way.

They work free of their clothing, no impetus driving either onward towards anything more than the openness they've already yielded - open minds and open hearts - to each other in baring themselves so much more than simply in their bodies. Will removes himself only long enough to lock the doors, leaving the doggie-door open for his companions to come and go, before shuffling back into bed beside Hannibal.

"You know," Will suggests, tugging up the sheets and blankets to surround them both, "if we do it again - a date," he clarifies, mischievous pleasure at the word. "Then it would mean we're -"

"Dating," Hannibal agrees somberly, raising his eyes to the ceiling with a deep sigh as he lets Will settle against his chest and drapes an arm over his shoulders. "A truly frightening concept for my grades." Hannibal ducks his head and smiles, relishing in the way Will's fingers feel against his chest as they splay and curl there.

One of the dogs, a very furry black something of unknown breeding, jumps lithely onto the bed and comes to explore the new creature taking over its usual sleeping place. Hannibal closes his eyes and presses his free hand against them.

"And my suits. Do they all sleep here?"

"Of course."

"Of course," Hannibal repeats with a sigh, put upon and entirely false. "I will take great pleasure in introducing you to my classmates as the culprit behind my no longer pristine appearance and my ineffably good mood."

Will is surprised, truly, at how wonderfully the words wind with a tender tension through his chest. Nervous too, a little, in the flutter of laughter that he presses against Hannibal's chest, before kissing there again to feel the hair against his lips, his cheeks, nuzzling fondly into it.

"Will you be introducing me?"

"Of course."

He hums a little, tilts his head up to rest his head beneath Hannibal's chin. "I'm not sure what the fine students of Johns Hopkins will have to say about all this." Running a hand across Hannibal's stomach, he tucks in tightly against the man's side, and adds, wry, "I am sure, however, that you've left your suit in a pile on the floor. Destined for wrinkles and accumulated fur. I suppose I should take credit for that." A pause. "And for your good mood, so long as I can blame mine on you."

Hannibal laughs, a gentle humming sound, and wraps his other arm around Will as well, a warm, loose embrace.

"I anticipate that there will be a lot of joy I will blame you for, Will," he murmurs fondly, closing his eyes and settling into rest.

He counts five dogs on the bed with them before he finally falls asleep, Will wrapped around him so close he can feel his smile against his chest.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> “I’m really shit at this,” Will finally says, “so I’m probably doing it wrong, but is this - are we -” An inquiring look - felt, rather than seen - from Hannibal brings out a nervous smile in Will, quickly demured. “Is this… a *thing*?"

Movement blurs, as if his vision were a camera sliding in and out of focus. In one frame, sharpening, Will kneeling beneath him, spine curved beneath Hannibal’s fingertips. The next, bare belly and chest smooth against Hannibal’s lips when Will bends and spreads his legs wider. Another, teases of sensation with Will between Hannibal’s thighs instead, hands on them to spread them wide and push deeper into him. He sighs and presses back into the pillow, fingernails curled against Will’s legs where he sits tall astride Hannibal’s hips.

“Will,” breathes Hannibal, and it’s only when the whisper is accompanied by the crackle of a wrapper that he blinks his eyes slowly open and Will pushes a finger against his lips.

“Shh,” grins Will, eyes still heavy with sleep, scarcely open as he tosses aside the wrapper and curls his hands back around Hannibal’s cock, already nudging hard against the curve of his ass. Despite being hardly awake, he slips the condom down skillfully, hips rocking against the cool morning air. The blanket slips from Will’s shoulders and he shivers, lip held between his teeth.

Hannibal blinks, tries to clear the sleep from his eyes as well and finds that his entire body is electric, sensitive and too warm, his cock too hard already, awake with Will atop him like this. It’s too early in the morning, still gray outside with the very beginnings of dawn, and Hannibal almost protests before Will shifts higher to kneel, meets Hannibal’s eyes from beneath tangled curls and smiles wider.

It’s a stunningly powerful sensation, Hannibal feeling Will straighten up, drop his head forward, then back with a groan as Hannibal feels Will stretch around him. Entirely unexpected, as well, to wake up to something like this.

Hannibal doesn’t ask again, takes Will’s advice, for the moment, to remain quiet, letting the smaller man pull gasps and sounds of pleasure from him as Will takes him deeper still, until Will is sitting astride him, hard and dark between his legs, head back again to arch his entire body in a gorgeous curve for Hannibal to touch.

Hannibal skims a palm of his hand up the length of him, from hip to nipple, tweaking it until Will laughs, that warm rumbling sleepy laugh before he ducks his head to look at Hannibal again. Then Hannibal allows his hands to slip down again, against Will’s ass to gently spread him just to feel Will shudder, to watch the blush crawl against his cheeks and over his nose.

“What are you doing?” Hannibal whispers, smiling wider, pulling Will down enough to stroke his hair, grasp it gently and bend him lower to try catch a kiss.

With a laugh, Will closes his teeth against Hannibal’s bottom lip, sucks it until the man beneath him groans, and only then pushes lazily back up to sit. He doesn’t rock his hips yet, doesn’t rub his aching cock against Hannibal’s belly, but simply stretches, pleased and full, every breath a moan to feel Hannibal buried so far inside of him, stretching him so wide.

“I believe,” Will murmurs, “it’s what the poets refer to as ‘fucking myself on your cock’.”

His voice is rougher than even his words, heavy with sleep and thick with a drawl that Hannibal has never heard catch and pull languid against Will’s voice before.

“Christ,” he sighs, the vowels drawn out long in the rich Southern purr, “I could sit like this for fuckin’ days.”

Head rolling comfortably forward, Will stretches with his hands braced against Hannibal’s stomach - pliant and soft beneath curling fingers - and finally rocks himself forward slow enough that he’s nearly quaking from it, so far that Hannibal nearly slips from inside of him before Will lowers himself back with no more hurry than before.

It’s hypnotic, both the rhythm of Will’s body against Hannibal’s own, and the words the pour forth against him when Will feels so inclined to be vocal - which is often. More and more of that thick accent that feels like caramel against Hannibal’s ears. He curls his hands up in WIll’s hair, lets them slip down his spine when Will sits up again and draws in a gasp, pressing a hand to his face to suppress a laugh, pushing his smile out of shape.

He is exquisite.

Hannibal can feel himself grow closer, still sleepy, body too sensitive and his mind entirely non-functional with Will like this atop him.

“I could get used to waking up like this,” Hannibal pants, draws his nails light over Will’s back before grasping his thighs and letting his nails dig in there, just a little, enough for Will to make a pleased sound, to shudder in pleasure.

Settling into a steady rhythm - still achingly slow, no rush to a frantic finish this time - Will hums his amusement with a wry little smile, caught on one corner of his lips. Arching, he tilts his head to look back over his shoulder, lips parting as he watches himself move forward and back on Hannibal.

He sighs long, eyes falling closed and mouth still slack, amusement wrought sleepy over his features as he murmurs, “I’m not going to stop until you’re fucking begging me.” A groan, rising high when Hannibal finally shifts his hips in response, and Will braces his hands back against Hannibal’s thighs, satisfied enough to leave himself untouched and dripping against the curls of hair on Hannibal’s belly.

“Fuck,” a breathless sigh as their position shifts, as Hannibal’s nails leave pale red marks down Will’s legs. “Don’t - ah - don’t you dare fucking cum until I tell you to.”

Hannibal curses, feels his lips split into a grin and presses back against the sheets with his eyes barely open enough to see Will above him. They move together now, Hannibal's hips up in languid rolls, an erratic unpredictable pattern, making Will curse and laugh and arch in the most beautiful ways.

Hands seek skin, curl against Hannibal's hair, down against Will's thighs, up against his ribs, down to Hannibal's neck… over and over, touching, moving together, until Hannibal finds that spot, the one that sends Will to shivering and the most incredible and colorful cursing.

"If I have to wait, you will take this," Hannibal murmurs, breathless, pressing his teeth gently against Will's neck to taste his pulse, to feel his throat vibrate with a laugh, with pleas, with all kinds of filthy things. Then Hannibal relents, groans, lies back again to watch Will above him.

Pressing into Hannibal's palm, Will draws his hand from his hair down to his lips, brushes Hannibal's fingertips across them so he can feel his grin, not merely see it.

"A challenge," Will responds, before he laughs. "I'll ride you all fucking day."

Although his body is all but trembling from the relentless press against his prostate - Hannibal almost cruelly able to find the spot with little effort - Will's eyes still narrow in a drowsy pleasure before closing contentedly. His lips part, and with a twist of his tongue, he brings Hannibal's forefinger into his mouth, cheeks hollowing as he sucks the length of it, moaning low in his throat.

Only then does Will slide his free hand to his cock, hardly even stroking so much as rubbing his palm slowly against it, pressed between his hand and Hannibal's belly. Though his mouth is full, there is a deviousness in the corners of his eyes, and another laugh perched on his lips.

It becomes a game, a toying with each other until both are panting meaningless curses and tattooing sweet nothings with their lips against skin. The sky outside has lightened further, though it's still cold. Hannibal chases the goosebumps over Will's skin with tickling fingertips before grasping the blankets and enveloping them both in a cocoon of darkness and warmth.

"Please," Hannibal purrs, smiling wide before pulling the blankets tighter to bring Will closer to him to kiss. They're slick with sweat, both trembling, both still muddled with sleep and want and the aching need for the other.

"Please," Hannibal repeats, "let me turn you over and make you moan my name again."

Will parts his lips with his tongue and grins, hiding it behind the hand he pushes against his face, and back into his hair.

"You want to fuck me deeper?" asks Will, nearly laughing as the words pour filthy and charming from him. "Spread me wide and put your cock in me so hard I can't even *breathe* from it?"

A pause, as his hand slips back to Hannibal’s thigh. Bending his back towards Hannibal, Will drags his touch against the soft skin of Hannibal’s balls, delighting in the way the velvety texture moves beneath his fingers. Higher still he touches, to where they are joined together, Hannibal unyielding hard where Will can feel the man pressing into him, his own opening hot, and deliciously tender.

“You’ll have to make me,” Will suggests, brow lifting.

"Mm, you said to beg," Hannibal reminds him, amused, grasping Will’s upper thighs hard before turning to pin the smaller man beneath him with a grin. "But I can do that."

The pace Hannibal starts is relentless, driving Will against the bed and drawing delicious sounds from him. He curls his legs up around Hannibal's hips and arches his back, head back to moan and pant and breathe soft curse words into the room. Hannibal holds him, hands against his thighs to spread Will wider, then up to thread their fingers together and pin Will’s hands above his head.

"What did I do," Hannibal groans, "I wonder. To earn such a man in my bed?"

Beneath him, Will squirms, frees one hand to slide between his legs again to stroke himself, body flushed and pliant and slick.

"It's technically -" Will gasps, holds his breath, then releases it on a laugh, beautiful and free. "- technically my bed."

Hannibal grins, ducks his head to bite against Will again and slows their pace to a slow, delicious rocking, just friction and touch, heat between them as Hannibal mouths against Will’s lips in the closest semblance of a kiss he can manage.

“There’s a list,” Will laughs in response to Hannibal’s wondering, before the sound carries higher into a moan and he splays his fingers across the blush spreading over his cheeks. “Though your cock - fuck - bonus points.”

He slings an arm over Hannibal’s shoulder and drags his nails sharp against the man’s back, tasting the hiss of pain with a sweep of tongue and press of lips.

“A lot of bonus points,” grins Will, even as his eyes fall closed, heavy and dark with desire. “Hannibal,” he whimpers. “Hannibal, harder - fuck, stretch me wide for you. I want to feel you all fucking day.”

Closing his fingers beneath the head of his own length, Will bites back his own release with another high sound, aching from the amount of pleasure Hannibal drives into him, breathless by the sharp thrusts and smothering joining of bodies and the crush of their mouths together.

Will curves away from him, twisting with a languid elegance despite the bed shaking with the movement of them, and he rides his leg higher up past Hannibal’s hip. Against his ribs, pressing, higher still until Hannibal moves his arm enough that Will gasps and hooks his leg over Hannibal’s shoulder, spread painfully and wonderfully, for Hannibal to press into him even deeper than before.

Hannibal thrusts harder but not much faster, drawing it out for them both until he nuzzles behind Will's ear and begs him with a rough, accented voice, to let him cum, to let Hannibal make *him* cum. A laugh from Will, a shake of his head, a gasp, before Will turns his head and mumbles something decidedly filthy against Hannibal's ear.

They writhe, just moment more, before Will's body spasms in pleasure and Hannibal follows not long after, delighting in the way Will's muscles tighten and squeeze around him then relax. He draws an open palm up Will's thigh to his knee, trembling, now, with the exertion, and gently eases it to the bed again, kissing down Will's chest in the process until his lips rest over Will's heart and they both lie still.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal murmurs, smiling against slick skin before kissing it again and looking down at the sleepy disheveled, utterly fucked out and pleased Will. "Christ."

Will hums a warm agreement with the curse, lips curving wide into a sleepy smile as he lightly shoves Hannibal off of him, onto his back and twists his body free from Hannibal softening inside him. A hiss, cheeks darkening, and hardly a hesitation before he slips his body against Hannibal's and presses his lips to his chest. Soft sounds rise from every kiss he lets linger against the sweat-damp hair, breathing in the smell of Hannibal - undiluted and masculine and heady. Eyes flashing upward, Will licks slow through the thick curls, lets them stretch long across his tongue, before grinning crooked and nuzzling against him, body going entirely limp, breathlessly satisfied and heavy over the larger man.

"Morning," he murmurs, touching his fingertips to Hannibal's lips and wriggling pleased when they're kissed. "Give me an hour and we can do it again," adds Will, stretching against Hannibal's side before burrowing in as if to sleep.

Hannibal blinks wide, surprised, despite himself entirely too amused. Against him, Will makes a soft sleepy sound and drops a heavy arm over Hannibal's chest to hold him close. Carefully, Hannibal still extricates himself to go to the bathroom, tying off the condom and tossing it before he stretches, a pleased, deep groan of pleasure before he rinses his face and wets a cool cloth to clean Will off.

He finds the man unresisting, already half asleep and entirely pliant as Hannibal gently washes him. By the time Hannibal returns to bed, Will is gently snoring, somehow still migrating his way across the bed and over Hannibal to sleep on him as the other reaches for his phone to write a message to Mischa, asking how she is, explaining that he will be home that afternoon and they can spend the rest of the day together.

He gets a ping back saying she's fine and that he can stay until night time if he wants to, but by that point Hannibal is dozing and pleased to be curled around Will.

When he wakes again the dogs are in bed once more, and it occurs to him that they had miraculously vanished for their previous activity. Hannibal draws a hand through Will's hair and smiles when the other stirs to waking.

Although little enough time has passed, it's with a quiet surprise that Will regards Hannibal beside him, smile widening as his limbs outstretch in a feline sleepiness. He ducks his head

against the man's chest, revels in the sensation of it against his cheek, and before the sigh has fully emptied his lungs, his eyes open.

He feels the sore muscles of his body, remembers waking up and taking Hannibal in hand to stir him to wakefulness in kind, remembers dragging himself over his hips with a mission in mind.

"Hell," Will murmurs, a florid heat brightening his nose, spilling across his cheeks. "I - what did -"

I believe it's what the poets refer to as 'fucking myself on your cock'.

"Oh god," he laughs, and spreads a hand over his face as if by doing so, perhaps he could hide his own embarrassment. "Did I say… what did I - no, no don't tell me."

Hannibal hums, as though considering potentially tormenting Will with his own words, but there is no malice there, just contented warmth.

"You were rather eloquent in getting your opinion across," is all he says, before pulling Will closer to kiss him again. It's warm, slow, and Hannibal shifts Will off of himself just enough after to stretch, bend his body until his bones pop softly and realign.

"It's been just over an hour," he murmurs, teasing, pleased, before Hannibal grins, seeing if Will would remember.

The words come back all at once, and it's all Will can do to groan and hide his face against Hannibal's armpit, buried shy and grinning against his side.

"There is a list, you know," he mutters, muffled. "Used to be 'all the reasons he shouldn't want anything to do with me' but I guess I can reconsider the title. 'All the reasons I'd better not let him out of my bed' maybe. 'All the reasons I want to wake up just like this every da-'," a pause, as Will catches himself, a breath before he amends, amicably, "...as much as possible."

Clumsily, Will rolls himself from where he tried to hide, to instead settle heavy atop Hannibal, pressing comfortably between his legs and leaning up - with a seemingly incidental roll of hips - to kiss him, a sleepy, sloppy thing that's far too pleasing.

"Do you have to get back?"

Fingers twining in Will's hair, Hannibal nuzzles into a slow kiss again, smiling softly. He lifts his phone from where it's fallen, sees the message, and drops it aside to rest both arms over Will's shoulders. "Not for some time, yet."

Sighing, Will shivers at the words, the promise in them - of company, warmth, nearness, tenderness - and snares another kiss from Hannibal before taking one also from his cheek, his jaw, down further to his neck, and finally looking up towards him with a devious pleasure as he sinks against his chest, and his hands lead the way down Hannibal's sides.

Hannibal smiles, bites his lip as Will deliberately insinuates himself between Hannibal's thighs, allows his knees to be bent and spread and drops his head back when he feels Will breathe warm against him.

It's nearly midday by the time they make it out of bed and into the shower, hands lingering and lips soft, but they manage to get clean, the house airing in the meantime with the windows flung wide and the door held open by a brick as the dogs meander in and out while the weather is fine enough for it.

It's a Saturday, neither have plans and yet both feel the tug of responsibility, Hannibal to return to Mischa, Will to run the errands he has been putting off all week as he'd waited, nervous, for their dinner on Friday.

Now, there seems to be little awkwardness between them, not that, physically, there ever really was. But now they talk, Will chattering happily, gestures wild and excited as he explains the intricacies of fly fishing, and how one time one of his dogs had waded in with him only to be swept up in the current, forcing him to launch himself into the water after her.

They share a coffee on the porch, each leaning against the old posts holding up the roof and bannister, legs tangled between them together across the steps. It's warmer, today, for the moment no rain, no threat of it. Hannibal curls his leg beneath Will's, sets his other knee alongside, and tilts his head to regard him.

"At least when you give your reports to your number one cheer person you don't have to censor yourself," he comments, taking a sip of his coffee, eyes narrowing in a smile over the rim of the mug.

Will grins into his coffee, tone rueful. "I *do* censor myself. Trust me, it does nothing," he responds. "Hell, even when I say nothing at all, she just starts guessing - or texting - about what she thinks should happen. I haven't even looked at my phone from last night," he adds, snorting amusement.

He stretches, turning his back against the railing and leaving his slippers on the stairs, to instead lay his legs over Hannibal's lap.

"Is she okay with it?" he asks, a twitch of worry between his brows. "Mischa, I mean. You two have such a good balance, I worry that I'm upsetting it."

Hannibal sets a hand - hot, from the coffee mug - against Will's ankle and holds softly against him. For a while he doesn't say much but there is no tension to suggest he is stalling an answer. Instead, he just curls his fingers gently beneath the hem of Will's pants and strokes his thumb over the skin.

"She always asks if you're going to come over again," he says. "Wants to know if you're bringing the dogs over - always plural, mind you, she has only met Winston but is convinced that the entire pack has to meet her."

Hannibal laughs, sets his mug aside and curls his other leg to sit more comfortably, as he holds Will against him.

“She and I share a lot of time together. I insist on it, I want to see her grow up, and I want to watch that as it happens.” He smiles, looks up. “You are not only a welcome addition to the process, but someone she seems to insist on being in our lives.” Hannibal rests his head back against the railing. “I am very happy to oblige. I would like to see you often.”

Will ducks his head with a small smile that for its restraint, is entirely genuine. He takes a long sip of coffee, sucks the taste of it thoughtfully from his lips, and his eyes narrow a little in thought.

“You’re very patient,” he notes, tipping his mug to look at the dark dredges left before setting it aside, and folding his hands between his legs, head against the railing. Color alights in his cheeks, and he turns his attention towards the dogs, watching as they cavort with each other, roll in the dirt, bound through the taller grasses.

“I’m really shit at this,” Will finally says, “so I’m probably doing it wrong, but is this - are we -”

An inquiring look - felt, rather than seen - from Hannibal brings out a nervous smile in Will, quickly demured.

“Is this… a *thing*? I mean,” he laughs, a shy breath, shaking his head. “Are we seeing each other? Just each other? Is this - are you - do you,” he stammers, before parting his lips with his tongue and forcing the words. “Do you see this as ongoing?”

A pause, and another huff of laughter.

“There must be a fucking waiting list for you,” he muses softly. “In high demand.”

Hannibal laughs, ducks his head, bites his lip gently before allowing himself to look out at the dogs as well. In truth, Hannibal has not been interested in a relationship, too busy to seek one out, and anyone who had actively made an effort to get into his life he has found to not be the kinds of people he can handle in a relationship.

Not necessarily shallow, but quite clearly seeing the mansion behind the man, and not the work behind that.

With Will he has never felt pressure to be anyone but not-quite-doctor Lecter. Will had not come into his life to gaze at the inheritance both he and Mischa have, he came in to help a little girl with horrible nightmares and terror, to learn to live with it. He had come to share what he is and in him Hannibal had found someone he had wanted to share himself with in turn.

“A lot of people do not see me,” he says, and it’s almost absent, almost too quiet, then Hannibal smiles wider, turns back to Will and gently jostles his foot until he can meet his blue eyes properly.

“This is a thing,” he tells him, amused at the wording and quite happy to repeat it. “I would very much enjoy seeing you. Often. Just you.” Hannibal says nothing on how long for, does

not make promises he knows neither of them can keep. He wants this to be ongoing. He knows Will does.

That's what matters.

Their eyes hold for a moment more, before Will's smile widens and he turns his eyes away again, unmistakably pleased - and himself surprised by how truly pleased he is - by the answer.

"Just me," he repeats, biting his bottom lip for a moment until his smile forces him to stop. "Just you."

It's enough to know that Hannibal wants to try - to see where it takes them, and to let this unfold and find out what comes of it. It's enough to know that Will himself wants to try just as much, when in the past he has so readily broken ties - by chance or by force - when any such notions have bubbled to the surface.

"Good," he grins. Withdrawing his feet from Hannibal's lap, he tucks them beneath himself to lean into a kiss. It tastes of coffee and trust and home, in a sense that Will has only ever imagined, and only rarely felt safe enough to even give himself the freedom to envision. He presses his fingers to Hannibal's cheek, smaller kisses taken and received, before finally just touching brow to brow with another little smile.

"I like you," Will says, as he leans back, to warm his toes against Hannibal's lap again. A statement of fact, as if he were observing that it's a little cold outside, or that he's out of coffee. "I like her, too," he continues. "Both of you. Together. Apart. What you have is special." He pauses, considering. "Rare."

It is unspoken but clearly seen in the easing of his shoulders, the relaxed lines of his body, the surprising contentment Will feels at being a part of it.

Hannibal smiles, settles his hands against Will's foot again and just sits, comfortable, both of them quiet together, no need for words to fill the space where dogs can bark and fill it with noise instead.

The drive back to the lot seems almost too short, hands clasped between them again, Will curled up in his seat in a way that suggests comfort and not nerves, Hannibal keeping his fingers loose on the wheel, knees up to support it. They are both entirely relaxed, having gotten their needed rest, their needed time together, their needed promises that both still smile remembering.

Just them.

Together.

Hannibal parks two spaces over from Will, gets out when he does and easily pins him to the passenger door to kiss.

"You'll call?" he asks.

Will laughs as he's pressed against the car, bending back languid against it, beneath Hannibal, to accept the kisses blushing.

"I'll call," Will tells him, between the kisses that chase his words, grinning. "And text. Flood your phone again," he teases, resting a palm against Hannibal's cheek. "You can call me, too, okay? Whenever. And I'll see you Tuesday anyway, for Mischa."

Another kiss, and then another, and then more, longer, until finally Will extricates himself breathless and grinning, slides out from between Hannibal and his absurd car.

"Tell Mischa I said hi, okay?"

Hannibal hums that he will, turns to rest against the car himself, hands in his pockets and ankles crossed as he watches Will navigate his keys and get his vehicle unlocked.

"Thank you for dinner," Hannibal says, when Will winds the window down to say goodbye, smiling mischievous before pushing himself to walk closer, to press one more kiss to Will's lips through the window.

"Next time I'll have to be faster to get the check," teases Will, watching as Hannibal returns the smile, before turning to return to his own car, get his own keys and get behind the wheel.

He watches Will drive off before starting the engine, and turning in the empty lot to take the road the other way.

The drive back home somehow feels faster and slower all at once. Certainly lonelier, but in a curiously comfortable way, the words they spoke still working their way through Will's mind, the skipping of a record that he doesn't mind hearing again and again. The refrain is just starting to slow, to become a lovely internal white noise beneath a litany of untended-to chores that Will has neglected, when he turns towards his driveway, and sees a truck parked there already.

And a familiar figure on the porch.

He stands, dusting off his jeans as Will exits his car, and it takes only a few steps crunching over the gravel drive to confirm that it's just who Will guessed it to be.

Who he hoped it would be.

Worried it would be.

"Matt?"

He knows the crooked smirk that greets him as much by the sight of it as how it twists something deep inside of him, a pleasant rush that shortens the next breath, and dissipates just as quickly. New tattoos, Will notices, glancing towards the dark lines that curve along the man's arm when he lifts a hand in greeting.

"Will," Matthew grins. "How've you been?"

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Bev hits send and pockets her phone, sliding a hand back through her hair. “So you... live here?”

Mischa considers for a moment, turns over her shoulder as though to regard the house properly, like she has not seen it her entire life.

“No, I live three houses down, I just climbed through the window,” she says, turning back, expression entirely blank, tone deadpan, before she grins and shakes her head. “Don’t be so formal, I promise I won’t make your life hell. You want a drink or something?”

Friday Night

“Well, this is,” Bev begins, words trailing off as if swallowed up into the cavernous ceilings. “This is a house.”

The door has scarcely locked behind Hannibal when she’s already run out of things to say, pointedly avoiding the bright eyes focused inquisitive on her. Really, it’s a credit that she’s managed not to say any of the first dozen things came to mind - *doesn’t a nap sound like a great idea, don’t you have homework to do, what do you want from me, is it your bedtime yet…*

She takes her phone out and texts to Will instead, lips twisted into a thoughtful frown, and eyes darting towards Mischa as though the girl can see what she’s typing.

Bev hits send and pockets her phone, sliding a hand back through her hair. “So you... live here?”

Mischa considers for a moment, turns over her shoulder as though to regard the house properly, like she has not seen it her entire life.

“No, I live three houses down, I just climbed through the window,” she says, turning back, expression entirely blank, tone deadpan, before she grins and shakes her head. “Don’t be so formal, I promise I won’t make your life hell. You want a drink or something?”

“God yes,” Bev sighs, before glancing towards Mischa again. “I mean, yes, please? Whi-... water? Water is good.”

Mischa's brow lifts, an expression remarkably like her brother as she offers, "We have the other thing, too."

"No," insists Bev, laughing once, loud. "No, really. Water would be great." She unshoulders her bag, made heavy with way too many books for one evening of babysitting - everything she could grab from their office, from picture books to paperbacks, when she realized she had no earthly idea what a twelve year-old would like.

Paws click against the floor, and she grins, instantly. "Maggie!" Kneeling, she opens her arms to the big brown dog, accepting the sloppy kisses and nuzzling her cheek. "How have you been, miss lady?"

Maggie plonks down and lets her tail hammer against the floor in joy. Mischa comes up to run her knuckles softly down the dog's neck.

"She loves to go to the park," Mischa tells Bev with a smile. "Runs around the garden a lot when we get home. They've let me take her to school, a trial week, and she's been so good there, the teachers get distracted."

Bev laughs, almost like a cackle, and sits on the floor so Maggie can press her paws to her thighs and very nearly climb into her lap.

"Yea, I'd imagine the kids love her for the distraction she causes."

Mischa grins. In truth, it's been so long since she's had a female influence in her life, in the house, at all, that it's as foreign to her as babysitting is to Bev. She doesn't know what to say that would not sound strange, the things she can tell her brother or Will.

"Do you like pizza?" she tries, finally, smiles when Bev looks up with an expression that speaks quite plainly that her relationship with pizza is intimate. "Hannibal didn't make dinner. I think we should order enough to frighten him into leaving again next weekend."

Another quick laugh, and Bev stands, setting Maggie's paws carefully back on the ground. "Definitely," she agrees, suddenly far more pleased with how the evening is going. "Couple pizzas. Extra cheese. Breadsticks. Those cinnamon-stick things. Pop?"

"Definitely," Mischa nods, grinning wide enough that Bev can tell she's probably not allowed them on any regular basis.

Bev squints a little, and ducks to mutter, conspiratorial, "And if any of this is shi-... stuff you're not supposed to have, keep it mum. He didn't say shi-... anything to me about it."

Mischa mimes zipping her lips, her own eyes narrowed in delight.

"Good." Bev stands again and finally eases out of her jacket, draping it over the rack beside the door. "Anything else we're missing?"

"Couch," Mischa says, happy to turn and lead the way through the long corridor and to the kitchen, a shortcut rather than meandering around the huge space to find the main room on the other side of it.

The living room is upholstered in dark fabrics, dark wood, and yet it doesn't look overcrowded and depressing. A fire is already burning in the grate, and the curtains are not drawn fully to the street. The only light comes from elaborate lamps stationed all over the small tables and bookshelves in the room.

Mischa gestures, arms wide as she turns, to show the room at large.

"Maggie," she points, a spot before the fire where a worn, soft blanket lies messy and lumped. "Rug."

The dog goes without hesitation, digging away at the blanket before she settles into it in a comfortable ball, warm by the fire. Mischa looks delighted by her ability to have the dog listen, and walks over to pat her, assure her how good she's been.

"The most comfortable one is the one over there," she points, walking over to a couch that looks older than she is, yet still beautifully cared for. Bev lets her hands run over the smooth back of it before letting herself sit in it as Mischa bounces on the other end.

"Damn," she grins. "This is some couch, kid, jeez. This entire house is like a walk through history."

"It's a bit weird," Mischa confides, smiling when Bev raises an eyebrow. "Mostly the downstairs looks like this, it's like a castle. Upstairs we have more modern things. Though, I did get Hannibal to sneak a TV in here," she says, smiling wide and pointing to an otherwise entirely unobtrusive set of sliding doors, as though hiding another storage shelf behind them.

Bev taps a skull on the table behind the couch, antlers spiralling long from it, and snorts, "He does like dead things, doesn't he? Unless these are yours," she adds, with another playful squint.

"Hunted them myself," agrees Mischa.

"Good answer. Cable?"

"Plus all the extra channels," Mischa chirps, hesitating for a moment before gleefully digging her feet into the couch, chin on her knees. "I don't know why, he doesn't even watch it."

Extracting her phone, Bev muses, "Let me guess - no TV on school nights?"

"And only an hour at a time on weekends," she laments, before mimicking her brother's deep voice, his rolling accent. "'It negatively affects sleep patterns, Mischa, and there are better things with which to fill your mind'."

"He's not wrong," shrugs Bev, "but it's also not a school night. And if we've only got an hour we can at least make it fu-... awesome." She holds up a finger for a moment, and puts in an order for an inordinate amount of food for the two of them. Two pizzas, sodas, cheesy breadsticks, dessert pizza, and considers wings before declining.

Mischa grins but doesn't yet move to get the remote, just watches Bev for a moment, who keeps her eyes on her phone even as she folds her legs up to the couch as well, smile devious

before she notices she's being scrutinized.

"Haven't had a girl's night in forever," Bev explains, to Mischa's delight.

"Always with the boys?"

"With Will, mostly, yeah."

"How do you guys know each other so well? Did you date?"

"God, no," Bev sighs, and spreads her arms across the back of the couch. "He's not my type, and I'm *definitely* not his," she says, with a flicker of amusement. "We went to high school together, for a little bit. He came in senior year, then I was off to school, he moved back south. Lost touch for a while, found each other again," she shrugs. "Internet and sh-... stuff."

"Oh," replies Mischa, a little disappointed by the story, until a smile appears again, decidedly clever. "You're not his type because he likes boys, right?"

"Nailed it," smiles Bev. She lets the silence linger a moment, considering a dozen questions she wants to ask, and at least ten of those that she knows she shouldn't, before regarding Mischa curiously. "You and your brother - where were you before this?"

Mischa gestures to the house. "Pretty much always here," she says, settling further into the couch. "Hannibal says we moved here when he was fourteen but I don't remember it." She shrugs. "Lithuania originally, I don't know the language so well anymore. Only what Hannibal has made me keep up."

Bev nods, brows up, impressed. "So Lithuanian and English?"

"And French and German."

"Damn kid, that's fu- much more than I got."

"You can swear," Mischa says, smile wry. "I still know what you're saying."

Bev snorts, shakes her head. "Your brother will kill me if he knows. I won't corrupt the youth with my sailor swearing, that comes with time. Such words are earned."

Mischa laughs. "Learned or earned?"

Bev makes a knowing sound, nods sagely and pulls her phone from where she had set it. Mischa regards her curiously before scooting closer.

"Will?"

"Guilty," Bev grins. "Trying to give him advice before he gets all twitchy and nervous on your poor brother."

She shifts the phone away when Mischa cranes her neck to read it, brow arching, before Mischa asks, "Why would he be nervous?"

After a moment of consideration, Bev shrugs. “Good question.”

“He shouldn’t be,” Mischa decides, flopping back onto the couch. “Hannibal likes him a lot. And he doesn’t really like anyone.”

“No?”

“Not really,” she says, brows furrowing as she regards the ceiling. “He’s *okay* with people. Like when he has people from his school or teachers or whatever over for parties. But he doesn’t like any of them like he likes Will.”

Bev shuts off her screen and goads her. “Go on.”

Grinning now, Mischa shakes her head. “He talks about him all the time. And then he tries to stop talking about him, and it’s like - it’s like you swearing. I know he’s about to do it anyway.”

“That’s,” Bev laughs, “that’s adorable.”

“So it’s pretty dumb that Will would be nervous. Hannibal’s already nervous anyway,” Mischa sighs.

Bev’s phone makes a sound and she nearly cackles at the message.

“To be fair,” she says, setting the thing away now, apparently satisfied that her advice will be taken and heard, “the way Will pines over your brother at work is something they should write ballads about.”

Mischa grins, settles.

“Boys are silly,” she says, “truly. The two of them act like teenagers and I’m almost a teenager and I would do it better.”

“Word.”

Mischa shifts her position a bit and Maggie looks up to make sure there’s nothing wrong. So satisfied, the dog returns to her dozing.

“Hannibal used to date better when he was younger,” she muses with a sigh. Bev regards her and is surprised, again, to see how many mannerisms - if used differently - she gets from Hannibal. The way her eyes roll in just that way to suggest annoyance in a polite way, the way her lips purse in the barest show of impatience…

“Then he didn’t for a bit, at all. He said everyone was stupid, all they wanted was the prestige of a partner, not the partner themselves.” Mischa smiles, turns to Bev with slightly narrowed eyes. “I think that’s why he likes Will so much. Will wants nothing from him but him. It’s good for them both.”

Bev considers her for a moment longer, expression surprised before it eases. “If this date goes badly because they’re too nice to each other to make it go anywhere we have to lock them in

a closet.”

“The one under the stairs has a light,” Mischa replies with a nod, and before either can speak again, the doorbell goes, and Mischa is up and launching herself down the hall for the pizza.

To their credit, they polish off one of the pizzas, and a good amount of the rest of the food. They talk - about training dogs and studying in school, about their favorite parks in Baltimore and recent superhero movies. Mischa helps Bev store the leftovers - delighted by what her brother might say when he’s home - and sips her soda through a straw, devilishly pleased by the indulgence.

Wrapping the last few slices in tinfoil - there’s no plastic wrap to be found, of course - Bev allows the quiet to settle in between them before asking, in no different a tone than the rest of their conversations, “Has it been nice having Maggie here?”

Mischa nods eagerly, swinging her feet from where she sits on the stool. “She’s a really good dog. And Hannibal lets her sleep in my bed.” Another impish grin.

“Oh yeah?” Bev asks, brows lifting as she files away the pizza, startled by the organization of the refrigerator, the tidiness of it. She studies it, pleasantly bewildered, and comments, “She’s probably nice to sleep with. Miss Maggie’s very calm.”

"Maggie always falls asleep before me," Mischa says, as they make their way back to the livingroom, and the dog looks up at the sound of her name, tail wagging happily before Mischa says her name again, grins, and taps her thigh to call her over. "Sometimes you snore," Mischa tells her and the dog whines happily.

"Big dogs are worse than men," Bev laughs, returning to the living room and stroking Maggie behind the ears. It's hard to ask without it sounding invasive or awkward, but Mischa seems comfortable enough with Maggie there, she and Bev had developed a night of rapport over pizza and silly stories. "Has it been a while since you slept well?"

Mischa shrugs.

"I don’t remember what even happened,” she admits, shifting to rest her thigh against the couch, the other knee up against the back of it so Maggie can rest her head against her. "I remember doors banging, and shouting. I know Hannibal was home that weekend, I remember his voice more than I remember theirs."

A frown, not one of fear or discomfort, trying to remember perhaps.

"The police said it was a break in. Whoever did it got startled, lashed out. Hurt my dad, hurt Hannibal. I heard two shots but... I think Hannibal was already down by then." She shivers and shakes her head, Maggie nuzzling closer. Then Mischa smiles. "It was a couple years after that that the dreams started. But with Maggie it's easier to sleep, now."

Bev doesn't say anything and Mischa doesn't offer more. After a while her grin is back and it's genuine.

"I'd been begging Hannibal for a dog for forever, but he is so picky with his suits and cleanliness." She bites her lip, leans closer. "When he thinks I'm not looking he gives Maggie cuddles."

Bev wonders how young Mischa had to be that she doesn't recall the events with any conscious clarity, but rather second-hand information and the deeply embedded imprints of that night. She wonders how young Hannibal was when he - who certainly remembers it - saw this happen, and had to wake up the next day with his parents gone, and obligated himself to fill their roles.

She runs a thumb over her phone, but thinks better of it and pockets it instead.

"The ones who start out strict are always the first ones to cave," Bev grins. "And they always cave the hardest. Watch, he'll be feeding her from the table in no time."

"I think he already does," murmurs Mischa, fidgeting already from the sugary soda and greasy food. "I've seen him 'accidentally' drop food on the floor when he's cooking, always little perfect cubes of meat."

"See?" laughs Bev. "Told you." She considers her options - television, a game, books maybe - but glances sidelong at Mischa wriggling her leg in caffeinated enthusiasm, and suggests, feigning innocence, "What if we played a prank? Since Hannibal's so picky with his suits. And his refrigerator, apparently," Bev snorts.

Sliding forward across the couch, perched on her knees, Mischa's eyes go wide. "Yes."

Bev blinks, and laughs loudly. "Jesus kid, that was fast."

"We have to," declares Mischa. "What can we do?"

Lips pursed in thought, Bev folds her arms for a moment, humming. "We could rearrange his suits," she suggests, brows raising. "Mismatch tops to bottoms. What do you think? You know him better than I do."

"He would think he lost his mind," Mischa murmurs, eyes almost too wide in her excitement. Maggie makes another whining sound, tail thudding against the floor as she takes in the excitement Mischa is exuding.

"Okay, okay - let's go. Before they come back too quickly."

Upstairs, it is as Mischa said, slightly less medieval castle - slightly more young family. The walls are less heavy with paintings, the doors allowed to stay ajar. There is a screen projector in the study, Bev notices as they pass it, the table enormous and covered in a shockingly tidy pile of paperwork and school books.

Mischa's room - inevitably shown - has one wall entirely covered in photographs, of her friends, of Maggie, places she has visited. Many choice photos of Hannibal looking far less stern and far more like Mischa's brother, a few photos of people Bev does not immediately recognize but knows are Mischa's parents.

The space is comfortable, large enough to have a lot of room between the desk and the bed, large window to let the light in during the day.

Down the hall they pass two guest rooms to get to the master suite, large, toned in grays and soft browns and blues. Bev whistles, impressed, and Mischa laughs, chastising Maggie to stay outside, not to track fur into the room where Hannibal's intensely honed senses would notice.

"Closet," Mischa introduces, sweeping a door open to reveal something that in a normal home would be a single bedroom.

"Holy shit," breathes Bev, stepping into it - not up to it, *into* it - and turning in a slow circle. "Sorry."

"I earned that one," laughs Mischa, darting in after her and pointing towards one rack of suits. "These are the ones he wears the most."

One rack.

Out of four, one on each wall of the walk-in, with shoes beneath, and a set of drawers that Bev assumes hold unmentionables, with a tie rack on top. She smirks a little, and steps towards the suits. Arrays of plaid and check, dizzying and sometimes almost psychedelic in pattern, she notes that each is evenly spaced - not one touching the suit beside it.

"Tricky," she clucks, sucking her teeth in thought before grinning at Mischa. "Two at a time, so we don't lose track of the order they're in. We'll switch the pants between them, put them back just as we found them." A pause, and Bev cackles. "Well, *almost* just as we found them. Clean in, clean out. Got it, kid?"

"Got it."

It's almost too easy, pulling the suits free, deftly rearranging them and setting them back. Mischa giggles like this is the best thing she has ever done and Bev can't quite stop smiling.

Hannibal has done a very good job raising Mischa on his own, he is attentive but not overbearing, encouraging but not stifling. Bev hopes Will can get over his truly irrational worry and give that man - and himself - a night to remember.

Almost on cue, her phone hums to life, and they both nearly drop their current suit victim in surprise. Bev pulls the phone out, thumbs it to speaker.

"Graham." She grins, "Why are you calling. What are you doing. Tell me everything."

Mischa listens, almost motionless as they talk, covering her mouth to stifle a laugh when Beverly somberly informs Will that Mischa is kicking her ass at chess. Bev points at her, eyes wide in a merry warning to hush, before stepping aside to absently study the ties, scattered with floral patterns and paisleys in dizzying array - like the worst sorts of wallpaper.

It isn't until Will grudgingly mumbles through the speaker about having to find somewhere that serves both whiskey and ice cream, that Mischa's giddy tension finally snaps and she

exclaims, “I can have whiskey ice cream!”

“Damn straight, kid,” grins Bev.

“Oh,” exclaims Mischa, nearly rising onto her toes with excitement. “And - and Hannibal! Be nice to Will!”

Bev cheerfully passes along the message - and even more cheerfully secures a boon from Will for agreeing to stay the night - before clicking off the phone.

“Think we fooled them?”

“Definitely,” Mischa beams, before holding up the next suit for Beverly to rearrange. “Your turn!”

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

> “Just tell him the truth.”
>
> “Sure," Will snorts. "‘Hey Hannibal, I know we just made this into a thing like a day ago, but my ex is staying with me for the foreseeable future’.”
>
> “Isn’t that the truth of it? Or is there more?”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Matt?”

“Yep.”

“*The* Matt?”

“Yep.”

“Jesus.”

“Pretty much.”

Bev considers for a moment, taps her fingers against her lips as she watches Will fidget with everything from his fingers to his hair to his shirt spread in front of her.

“That why you came here to do laundry?”

“I told him mine was busted," Will says, drawing both hands through his hair. “Needed to get out and… clear.”

“No shit.”

Will snorts, nods, shakes his head, buries it in his hands and groans. “Bev, why does this happen? Why does shit happen as soon as I think shit has stopped happening?”

She shrugs, brows drawn in concern as Will sits almost folded in half on her couch. He had come not an hour before, Winston in tow along with a hamper of clothes that were entirely clean, babbling things Bev could not understand till she had a few shots in him for Will to calm down and sit. Now, at least, it makes sense why.

“It was like flipping a photo album back,” Will whines. “Same damned crooked grin, those fucking dimples that I could just -”

Eyes narrowed in amusement and mischief, a look Will had quickly learned to associate with sex in illogical and utterly perfect places. All that and the same form, still lean and tall, a year older and claiming to be aeons wiser. Will can’t stop staring.

“You only ever did have two gears,” Matthew grins. “Silence and swearing.”

Will blinks, shakes his head, takes a step closer to mirror Matthew’s advance.

“Fuck. Sorry. Hi. Just… unexpected. Shit, Matt, it’s been a while.”

Every step nearer adds another drop to the turbulence roiling in Will’s stomach. The sight of the duffle bag on the porch doesn't help.

"Winston inside?" Matt asks, thumbing towards the house.

"Yeah," sighs Will, laughing. "And six others."

Matthew whistles long. "Started that up again, huh?" It's not an ungentle remark, and though Will thins his lips, it's all bark - he's not entirely wrong. There were only three, then, Winston and two others that came from crime scenes. Will couldn’t stand the thought of them being taken away, and so they’d come home, and stayed.

"Little more reasonable with the rescue," Will answers, watching Matt from close now, and feeling his words falter with the nearness. "And the house."

"Apartment did end up a bit cramped," grins Matt. "You look good, Will."

As Will knew he would, Matt is the first one to extend a hand, and when taken, he reels Will against him and wraps an arm over his shoulders.

"Shit." Bev arches a brow.

"I mean, it was just a hug. One arm, pat on the back."

"A friend-hug," Bev clarifies.

"Right," sighs Will. "But when he leaned back, and *looked* at me..."

She sets down a mug of coffee in front of him, and drops into the seat across. “How did he even find you?”

“Police department keeps records,” Matt shrugs, a flippant gesture made somehow charmingly cavalier by the crooked grin that lingers there. Will can’t help but laugh again.

“Jesus, Matt.”

“Been a long time since I’ve heard that,” he responds, running a hand back over his cropped hair. Will waits until he turns to look out over Wolf Trap, towards the treeline, to take him in. Lean in a way that doesn’t betray the strength Will knows he has, he finds his mind wandering towards the tattoos etched into his ribs where Will would so often place his hands. He wonders if he has more, and bites his lip, continuing towards the house.

“What - ah,” Will stammers, brow furrowing. “What brings you all the way out here?”

“Needed a break, and Baltimore's always been home."

"This is a fair way out of the city," Will points out, sees the way Matt's shoulders bunch in a sort of half shrug. "Brace," Will warns, and Matt has a moment of narrow-eyed amusement at the choice of words before the dogs come pouring from the door, surrounding Will, meandering over to see who the new person is.

"Hey!" Will could melt looking at that smile. "Look at you! Last time I saw you I could pick you up in one hand, what's he been feeding you?"

"Dogs remembered him," Will mumbles. Bev frowns but says nothing otherwise, gives Will the space to gather himself. Winston whines softly and Will reaches out to draw his fingers through the silky fur.

"They always liked him. Winston was happy to see him. Buster was wagging that stubby tail so hard he nearly fell over." Will laughs, bites his lip and looks up. "I'm fucked, right?"

“Kind of up to you,” she shrugs, “but not necessarily. So he’s just visiting?”

“Looking for a place right now.” Matt scoops Buster up and squints against the barrage of licks and eagerly flailing feet he receives for his trouble. “Hey buddy.”

“You’re moving back.”

Matt’s grin widens. “You always were a quick one.”

“Shut up,” Will sighs, and only just restrains his grin to a smaller smile. A common admonition, many years unspoken, and Will glances from Matt to his bag, up to the house. Working his lower lip between his teeth, he draws a breath.

“You didn’t,” Bev interjects.

Sprawling his arms across the table, Will presses his forehead to them and groans. “I did. What else could I do? He shows up with a fuckin’ bag of clothes and nowhere to go…”

“Knowing you’d take him in.”

“You always did like strays,” Matt quips. “You sure you don’t mind?”

“I’ve got enough dogs to keep you in check,” responds Will, rueful. Matt laughs, muttering allegiances into Buster’s ear, and though in his eyes the temptation is there, he doesn’t yet

follow to sit beside where Will has settled on the top step of the porch. “I thought you hated Baltimore.”

“I do,” answers Matt, finally setting down the pup and dusting a few wiry hairs from his hooded sweatshirt. “It’s still home, no matter how I feel about it. And I needed to get out of Nola. It lost a lot of its appeal when you left.”

Will snorts, scrubbing a hand across his cheek as he feels it warm at the words. “You didn’t leave because of me.”

“Nah. But showing up at a scene was a lot less fun when you weren’t there.” He catches the dry look that Will sends him, the raised brow, and finally meanders closer to the porch, sitting down a short distance away.

Where Will had sat earlier that morning, across from -

“Hannibal,” mutters Will into his arms. “I don’t know what to do.”

Bev clicks her tongue, moves towards the kitchen, ignores Will’s plaintive demand for whiskey or something stronger and returns with a glass of water for Will and a string of red licorice for herself to chew.

"You should tell him," Bev says, stretching the thing between her teeth before it snaps. Will sighs, rubs his face, drinks the water with a frown.

"Come on Bev, water?"

"No whiskey at the laundromat and you have to drive home."

"But -"

"You're avoiding this," Bev warns. "You can't avoid this, Will, you have to tell him."

"That I have a friend staying at my house or that one time said friend thought it would be hot to fuck in the back of a speeding ambulance?" Will asks weakly, eyes up to his friend, finding very little mercy there.

"I can't believe you kept that thing." Matt drops his bag beside the door and resigns himself to it being investigated by curious noses as Will sets the coffee maker going.

"It's never failed me," Will shrugs, avoiding looking at Matt as the man explores his home. It's very strange having him so close again, brings knots up in Will’s stomach in a way Hannibal never has. This is an entirely different feeling for an entirely different man.

"Can't quite ever take the apartment out of the kid," Matt laughs. Will turns to see him gesture towards the bed in the living room. He doesn’t tell him that it's there to see the front door. He supposes Matt, of all people, knows. "What's upstairs for then?"

Will glances upward. “Spare bedroom. I put the dogs up there when I need to contain them.”

“So I’m in good company then,” Matt responds, peeling out of his sweatshirt and scratching his side through the thin white undershirt. He catches Will’s eye, holds it, dark eyes narrowing in a way that nearly makes Will dizzy. “Ask.”

“Are you in trouble?”

Matthew sighs long, and tosses his sweatshirt onto the couch. There’s no annoyance in his expression, no frustration at the question he must have known was coming - he’s heard it enough times in his life to know better than to bristle at it. He settles into the couch with a languid stretch, arm over his eyes.

As though he lives here.

As though he always has.

“No.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Bev responds. “But why -”

Will shakes his head, slumping back in his chair, arms folded loose over his stomach. “It was a shitty question to ask. I shouldn’t have.”

“I think it’s valid. Someone shows up on your doorstep after years, needs a place to stay…”

“...has a record?” Will adds for her, and Bev shrugs, unphased. “It was a long time ago. ‘Youthful indiscretions’, he called them.”

“Which means?”

"No morphine missing from the ambulance," Matt drawls, and Will can hear the smile in his voice, "No one put there by me." A sigh, and that body shifts into a long stretch that has Will staring out the window pointedly until he hears Matt settle.

"The pressure got too much. Only a special kind of someone can play at EMT for more than a decade. I reached my level, they let me go. Said time out in the country would do me good and imagine what I find here when I come looking."

This time, Will sees the grin. Nearly burns himself on his coffee trying to drink it so fast.

"Seven dogs and an ex-cop?"

"Actually very close to where I'd imagine you'd be."

"Got your smooth talking from him?" Bev asks, and Will narrows his eyes at her.

"Shut up."

Her smile widens a little, and she offers out a twist of licorice that Will takes to grudgingly gnaw on.

“What are you going to tell him?”

Will blinks. “I was hoping you could tell me.”

“You wish,” Bev laughs. “Fuck if I know, Graham. Just tell him the truth.”

“Sure," Will snorts. "‘Hey Hannibal, I know we just made this into a thing like a day ago, but my ex is staying with me for the foreseeable future’.”

“Isn’t that the truth of it? Or is there more?”

Will considers the question, fingers curled around his mug, and finds that he doesn’t have an answer. He doesn’t know if there’s more yet, and feels worse still for knowing the way that seeing Matt there seemed so immediately comfortable.

“It’s good to see you again,” he tells him, sitting against the arm of the couch by Matt’s feet, old sneakers dangling over the edge.

Matt drapes a hand down towards Buster, grunting as the little dog leaps onto his chest instead and turns a small circle before settling there. “He thinks so, too,” Matt observes, long fingers curling against the soft white fur. “So you work with dogs now? Seems right.”

"Couldn't leave ‘em behind," Will shrugs, smiling as he watches the two of them interact. Matt had been one of the first people to meet Buster, when he had been little and hungry and shaking, wrapped in Will’s scarf as they left the crime scene.

Now he's a fairly substantial dog.

He blinks back to the now with a small frown.

"Police wouldn't have that on file," he says. "I was off the grid a few months anyway -"

"You’re all over Google," Matt tells him, lips pursing in a pleased half-smile at Will’s expression. "All over it. Old articles, records, Katz & Dogs." He smiles properly, now.

"You Googled me?"

"The most legal form of stalking," Matt grins, turns away long enough to reach for the mug Will had set on the floor for him. "I wanted to see how you were, after the -"

"Yeah." Will nods, a sip of coffee through pursed lips. "Good. Fine. Yep."

“Shut up,” sighs Matt. “I don’t have to be a fuckin’ detective to know when you’re full of shit.”

Will can’t help but smile a little, even as Winston sidles closer to him, fluffy tail sweeping wide across the floor. “I’m managing.”

“That’s a little better,” Matt allows, slurping a sip of the coffee before depositing it back on the floor and curling onto his side, head in his hand and Buster nestled against him. “They

got the guy, though, so at least there's that."

"At least there's that."

Matthew toes his shoes off, each thudding loudly against the floor beside Winston, and he prods Will with his foot. "Hey."

Will lifts a brow.

"It's really good to see you again."

Bev sighs, sweeping her hair back from her face and resting her chin in her hand. "You think he wants to get back together?"

Will shrugs, eyes down, just thinking.

"We were never really... together. Not like... unlike with Hannibal. It was sporadic, quick, fumblings and bad Chinese take-out on Friday nights."

"Sounds like dating."

"No, it -" Bev raises an eyebrow and taps her fingers against her lips. Will relents. "It was different."

"Not what I asked, Will."

"I..." Will sighs. "It doesn't matter if he does. I don't."

Bev presses her lips together but it's not to call Will on a lie. She just watches him before drawing her hand through her hair again, working a band from her wrist into it so it settles in a messy bun.

"Were you gonna stay long?" Will asks, allowing a smile but not the return of the sentiment, not yet, though it is really, strangely, good to see Matt again.

"You kicking me to the curb already?"

"Not unless I need to," he smirks. "Do I need to?"

Matt grins. "Gotta at least give me a chance to get into trouble first," he remarks, curling onto his side as Buster hops to the floor. He tucks his arm beneath his head, watching him even as Will averts his eyes back to the floor. "I've just gotta find a place. Figure out work, I guess. Construction, maybe. Good for the body." A rush of warmth to Will's cheeks is entirely the reaction Matthew wanted, and he remarks, pleased, "You're hopeless."

"Maybe," Will allows, but the image is there before he can stop it. Matthew is just as strong as Hannibal, Will wagers, but the body that carries that strength is wholly different. Hard angles carved deep and honed planes of muscle, a point of pride for the man, decorated with black lines of obscure symbols across his skin. Hannibal is soft to the touch, pliable, and still entirely capable of slinging Will over his shoulder if he wished to do so.

The color darkens, as Matt's grin widens.

"Not you," Will finally sighs, "I'm not -"

"Liar," Matt sing-songs, before drawing himself to sit up and swallow down the rest of his lukewarm coffee. "You were too."

Will stands, wary of the nearness of Matt now, how close he sits, how readily the banter returns to them after so many years apart. Wary of the thoughts and memories that flare like embers beneath his skin, all the nights they spent together, the gradual slide of toothbrushes and clothes taking up space where once there were only his own.

"You can stay," Will tells him, meeting his eyes. "I mean, whatever you need, okay? But this can't be -" he sighs. "I'm seeing someone."

The pause is so long that Will finally ventures a look up. He finds Bev with a deep frown on her face and eyes directed into the middle distance. She doesn't say anything, Will doesn't make her. For a long time they just sit, before Will stands up to pass Bev to make a cup of coffee and she doesn't stop him.

There isn't a machine, so he digs around in the pantry for the ground Italian roast in its paper bag, and the copper pot to brew it in.

It sounds almost too loud as he sets the thing to the stove, half-filled with hot water from the tap and set to boil more, the coffee within heavy, some grains floating on top until they soak and sink.

"Did he -"

"Nope."

Matthew tilts his head, as though having heard something from very far away through the resounding silence between them, and then slouches back into the couch, arm draped across his stomach.

"You?"

Eyes narrowing despite the neutrality of Matt's tone, Will nods. "Yes. Me."

"Who?"

"You don't know him."

"I might," Matthew suggests, and Will snorts, turning his eyes away from where Matt's fingers rest against his stomach, threadbare shirt thin enough that he can see the man's tattoos shadowed dark beneath it. "Not really your style, is it? Commitment."

It's a subtle jab, but it sticks, and Will rolls his eyes as he stands to refill his mug.

"I'm not getting into this."

“But you already have,” chirps Matthew, spreading out onto his stomach to fold his arm where Will sat, chin on it as he sprawls. “Just not with me.”

“You know, you don’t have to sta-”

“Tell me about him.”

“What?”

Matthew shrugs, and there’s a glimmer in his dark eyes, like the shine of scales in brackish water. “Tell me about him.”

Will falters for a moment, jaw slack and brows drawn, a warning bell rings profound somewhere close by but he doesn’t still it, doesn’t much heed it, either. There isn’t much Matt can do, beyond listen, beyond grow jealous and possessive and irrationally competitive…

“He’s studying,” Will says, setting his mug to the counter, using the thing as a barrier to lean against.

“Where?”

“Johns Hopkins.”

Matt whistles, low, impressed if his eyes weren’t so narrowed.

“Studying for?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Business?”

“Matt.”

“Law?”

“Matt, stop.”

A pause, then, and the smile that broadens across Matthew’s face is far from the welcoming soft thing of before. He laughs, draws a hand over his face and lets it rest in his hair as he sets his elbow to the arm of the couch.

“Don’t tell me he’s a doctor.”

Will ducks his head to regard the contents of his mug, hands clasped above his head loosely, shoulders lax.

“He thinks I have a medical thing,” Will mumbles, doesn’t glance up when Bev snorts.

“Do you?”

“Not… significantly enough to actually be a thing,” Will counters, tilting his head up. “I’ve been with a few guys in the field, but when I worked the force we would mingle often, they were first responders, we were first responders… it happens.”

“Anyway,” Will adds, quiet, “he’s just studying right now.”

“Oh,” Matt exclaims, holding a hand out to interrupt. “Let me guess.” Eyes narrowed, Will’s jaw works a little tighter as Matt ventures, “Surgeon. Right? Fuck, Will.”

“I didn’t even sa-”

“But I’m right, aren’t I?” he interjects, a Cheshire Cat grin caught in the corner of his lips again. “Go big, I guess. He’s probably that, too, isn’t -”

“Matt. Enough.”

The sharpness of Will’s tone is enough to startle awake several of the dogs, and bring Winston to attention. Matt sighs, pushing to sit up with a long stretch, and taking up his mug as he stands.

“Step up from a shitty EMT, isn’t it?” he remarks, showing little interest suddenly in coming nearer Will except to get to the coffee. “I don’t blame you. Or him. We should all be so lucky to have the cards to play in our favor.”

Will can feel his cheeks color, flushed with anger and a strange sort of guilt he knows is not his to feel.

“It has been years, Matt,” he reminds him, folding the anger and unwarranted shame beneath logic and reasoning. “Since us. Since whatever that was. I doubt you’ve been waiting up nights alone.”

Will shrugs, shakes his head, leaves the kitchen and his mug at the counter as he passes Matthew on his way to the main room, hand out for Winston to sniff, to nuzzle into.

“I’m seeing someone and I am happy,” he says, a delicious little shiver within suggesting he means the words entirely. “Relationships were never a stepping stone for me to something ‘better’. Never notches on a bedpost, Matt. They happened.”

"'Whatever that was' happened," agrees Matt, ruffled feathers suddenly smoothing. "What it was that meant I had to pack up my things when you moved," he adds, shrugging. "Different things to different people. And time now, to distort it all."

Will starts to protest, lips parting to refute Matthew's skewed memory of what was between them rather than what the years apart have made him imagine, but he quiets as Matthew sighs, and rolls his neck to stretch before setting a hand against it and bringing himself nearer Will.

"Didn't take long to come back to this, though, did it?" he asks, a self-effacing little smile.

"Not sure we ever stopped," Will murmurs, "more that we just weren't talking."

"Sorry," Matt finally mumbles, hands on the counter, pushing up onto his toes. Always a nervous energy about him, unfocused and raw, enough sometimes that he can hardly hold a conversation without rising and pacing and losing interest. A reason, Will has always considered, that school never sat well with him, enough that his strife with it lead him to leave and pursue alternative interests.

Youthful indiscretions.

He shakes his head to clear his thoughts, again to dismiss the apology. "It's fine."

"It's been a long ride up here," explains Matt, sliding back down to his heels with a sigh. "I should go."

“You should have told him to.”

“I know I should have,” Will mumbles, sipping this coffee now, stronger than the one at home, richer. “There’s a lot I should have done.”

Bev hums, cradles her coffee in her hands.

“You can have the bed,” Will gestures. “I’ll take the couch, I just… I just need to do some laundry, new sheets and stuff.”

Matt raises an eyebrow, Will shakes his head and curses.

“Not like that. It’s just. Polite. For… whatever. Just. There’s some food in the fridge if you like, take anything, I’ll feed the dogs when I get back. I won’t be long.”

“To the basement and back? I hope not.”

“No, mine’s… it’s busted. Going to the laundromat.”

“And then you came here,” Bev finishes.

“And then I came here,” Will agrees. He downs his coffee and watches Bev with a look of pure puppyish despair. “And I need you to tell me what to do.”

“You don’t,” she corrects him, pointing with a licorice. “You know what you need to do. And more to the point, you know what you need to *not* do.”

“I need to not sleep with him,” mutters Will.

Bev jabs the air with the floppy candy. “That’s number one. Seems like a bad idea all around. Just friends, Graham.”

“Just friends,” he repeats.

“No benefits.”

“No benefits,” sighs Will. “I don’t even want to -”

“If you didn’t, you wouldn’t feel the need to keep saying it. It’s fine, I’m not judging, you had a thing and from what you’ve told me, he’s smoking hot. But do you want Chinese take-out and ambulance fucking, or do you want Hannibal?”

“Well, we couldn’t do it in an ambulance now, but -”

“Graham.”

“I know,” he groans. “I want Hannibal. I *like* Hannibal. I like what he does to me and I like who he makes me into.”

Bev’s smile softens a little, surprised by the earnest admission, and she snaps a bite from the licorice. “Good. So you don’t sleep with him, which also means watch your booze around him, and you tell Hannibal.”

“Bev -”

She menaces him with the candy again, and Will huffs.

“If you’re not honest, you’re being dishonest. There’s no in-between. You have a friend staying with you, who also happens to be an ex, but you like Hannibal, and wanted him to know so he’s not surprised and assuming the worst when chiseled abs answer the door.”

Will groans and slides back in his chair.

“In person. At least by phone,” she adds. “No texting.” Will makes another sad noise and she laughs. “You owe him that much.”

“I know.”

“Atta boy.” Bev checks her watch, makes a considering sound. “If you were actually at the laundromat you’d have to go in half an hour. Dryer would be done. So either you call him now, or you call him in the morning, but you’re calling him.”

Will makes another sound of pathetic displeasure and Bev doesn’t push it, just runs her fingers through Will’s hair as she passes him to turn on the TV in the main room. It’s soothing, background noise and meaningless enough for Will to slowly zone out to it, eyes glassy and head elsewhere.

He dials Hannibal after twenty minutes of staring forlornly at his phone and hits the voicemail, either he’s busy or the battery is dead. Will doesn’t leave a message, though he holds long enough to hear Hannibal’s voice tell him to please leave a message and excuse him for missing the call.

By the time he leaves Bev’s, he has had three coffees and can feel himself almost vibrate with the energy. He drives slowly, careful on the roads, and runs scenarios through his mind, each sounding worse than the last.

Hannibal, don’t freak out, but I have someone staying with me a few days… no, no, no, if you tell him not to freak out he instantly will, it’s a common reaction, be calmer, try, Hannibal, I

have a friend staying with me a few days. How do I know him? Oh, back in the day we were… close. No. That implies… exactly what happened. Fuck. Fuuuck.

Get a grip, Will, just tell him.

Hannibal, this is Matthew Brown, he's staying with me a few days, a friend from a while back. Just wanted you to know so that… you didn't worry? Didn't assume? Didn't get jealous?

Jesus.

Will makes it most of the way home before he can calm his mind enough to know what he'll say. He will do it in person, too, no phone calls, no hiding behind a receiver. He owes him that much.

A breath drawn as he enters, Will holds it, savors the flavors in the air, unrefined and comforting.

"Matt?" he calls out.

"Yo."

Will follows the voice in the kitchen, and remains in the doorway for a moment, watching Matt at work over the stove. It's a far cry from the elegant symphonies of Hannibal's compositions, confident and unhurried, boundless grace that makes the entire effort seem effortless. Matt, by contrast, is more akin to a punk band, chaos that coalesces into something viscerally enjoyable.

"What?" Matt challenges, eyes narrowed in amusement.

"Nothing," shrugs Will as he finally comes closer. "Wondering how many of my pots you're burning."

"Most of them."

"Why?" Will raises a hand before Matt can answer, and steps nearer. "You don't need to apologize."

Stirring the pot, Matt sighs a laugh. "God," he mutters, "I hate how you can do that."

"No you don't," responds Will, lips twisted in amusement.

"I know. *You* know. But, I mean, I know my way around a box of pasta. I can do this. I just wanted to do something nice." A pause, and Matt allows the pot to boil unharried, pushing a hand back to rest stretching against his shoulder instead. "After being a dick before."

Will purses his lips before clearing his expression.

"You better do the dishes as well," he says. Matt scoffs.

“Don’t push it.”

Will grins and feels his cheeks color, such familiar conversations, familiar sensations and desires and yet something profoundly different now, a strange understanding of how this *was* but no longer is, far from a regret but an establishment of understanding.

Will makes his way towards the bed, already stripped from when he had made up his laundromat excuse, dragging the basket with him and unearths a set of clean sheets to remake it. It’s a quick process, with only four of the dogs helping instead of all seven, and Will returns to the kitchen in time to see Matt spooning something akin to macaroni into two bowls, a sauce that smells - quite frankly - divine on top in generous dollops.

“I hope you still remember how to sleep around dogs,” Will warns him gently. “Three I know will join you, the others will warm up to it. You’ll be swarmed.”

Matt turns to regard Buster, stalwartly by his feet, and nudges the dog with his bare foot, to no avail. “Be nice to have the company. Haven’t been around them in a while, but I can’t imagine much has changed,” he grins, finally reaching down to lightly snare the pup’s muzzle, teasing gently before releasing him with a warm scratch.

“I got beer,” Matt adds, the suggestion of a smile tweaking one corner of his lips. “Not sure if it’s still your particular preference, but it’s there if you want it.”

“I need a beer,” Will sighs, relieved. It’s easy enough to slip back into this with Matthew, just this. Talking and drinking and sharing a meal, with the dogs - though many more now - meandering at their feet begging-without-begging for food.

They eat at the counter, Will’s table too full of lures and gear to bother cleaning it off. Matt stands, Will perches on a stool opposite him and they both end up roughly the same height still. The pasta is delicious, still nothing to Hannibal’s dinners but something that holds a very welcome street-food quality that Will finds is entirely too familiar, too warm, too perfect.

It’s spicy, meaty, goes fantastically with the beer and leaves Will contented enough to not force Matt on dishes.

Matt, to his credit, doesn’t near the terse conversations shared earlier that day, but perhaps conspicuously so. And so Will is glad to share a stack of towels and sheets with him, making his couch Matthew’s bed, and no sooner does Matt mention taking a shower than Will shows him the way, and steps out of the house entirely.

He settles on the porch, no dogs or people outside with him, and draws out his phone, sweater drawn tightly around him.

Missed call, but enough warm food and cold beer in Will’s belly that he hesitates rather than redials it, and opens a text to Hannibal instead.

Just seeing how the rest of your day went.

The phone brightens immediately with a response, and Will can't help but grin. bottom lip held between his teeth.

It would have been better with you.

Pushing his hands out of his long sleeves, Will grasps the phone with both hands and begins to type, but the appearance of ellipses in the window stills his touch.

The next date is technically yours, reads Hannibal's text. *but would you accompany me to an event on Tuesday?*

Will worries his lip a moment more before quickly punching back, *what sort of event?*

Semi-formal, comes the response a few moments later. *A reception at the university. It would be far less tedious with you beside me.*

It isn't exactly the message Will had intended to send, to ask to meet and to inform him in as calm a tone as he can muster that Matthew will be - foreseeably - in his home. But he presses the back of his hand against his cheek to cool the blush there, and sighs at the terror and temptation of being Hannibal's plus-one to such an event.

Will should hate these things. He does hate these things. But with Hannibal, it suddenly bears with it a new context entirely - to be seen with him, in the eyes of his peers, a chosen equal.

Yes, Will texts before he can stop himself from sending it. *Can't wait.*

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

> "I wanted to ask you about Will," Hannibal says at length, can almost feel the grin before he glances down to see it there.
>
> "Yes, you may marry him," Mischa nods sagely, and Hannibal laughs, shakes his head.
>
> "Perhaps a talk for another day of skating," he jests.

Hand pressed to the window, Mischa watches the streets pass with consternation. She remains quiet, sliding down into the passenger seat for a moment of slouching, two, and self-reminded, finally wriggles to sit up straight again. Music filters softly from the speakers, uplifting melodies tuned quiet.

“Handel?” she ventures.

Hannibal’s lips quirk. “Very good.”

Another block passes, and another, and her sly attention focuses on the clock. She begins to calculate how long it’s taken them to go this far past the dance studio, how long it will take Hannibal to right the car, and whether she’s stayed quiet long enough that she’d be too late to class to bother going.

Eyes narrowed, she fights down a smile and waits several more streets before chiming, “You missed the turn.” Twisting her ponytail around her finger, she works to keep her expression neutral and hide the scheming grin that threatens to appear. “Distracted?”

“No,” her brother responds amicably. “I thought perhaps a change of structure for today.”

Eyes wide and smile wider, Mischa nearly bounces with delight but restrains herself, ladylike, to toss her hair instead.

"How peculiar and delightful,” she says, and Hannibal feels himself smile. It is a school night, one of the few he is not studying late - by timetable and choice both - and his heart simply is not in keeping to a strict schedule. He wants to do something childish and youthful, something fun.

"So it is," he agrees finally, helpfully not telling his sister where they are headed, but she seems content enough to be going somewhere together that she does not push, does not ask, and settles back into her seat to watch the world pass by the window.

It is early evening still, the dusk falling quick over the city after an uneventful day. Hannibal directs the car through the streets of Baltimore, going against peak-flow traffic until a building looms ahead that catches his attention but not Mischa's. He gives it time, several moments of quiet classical music and his sister humming along until she turns her head.

And this time, she does bounce in her seat.

"The rink, Hannibal?" she laughs, pressing knuckles to her grin in an attempt to both stifle and cement it.

"Another style of dance," he responds, glancing towards her with a smile gathered beneath his eyes. "Something we might enjoy together."

She is first from the car, bounding enthusiastically from it before settling primly, and smoothing down her dress. Tugging her hair free from where it was held back for class, she lets the long strands free with a toss of her head, like an impatient pony, and Hannibal follows after her as she leads the way inside.

"A particular occasion?" she asks, unable now to restrain her bright grin.

"None at all," answers her brother, "but to enjoy the company. Perhaps you will teach me something you've learned."

"I don't dance on skates," Mischa laughs. "Or on ice."

"Then we will learn together."

The rink is not especially populated. A few small children, wobbling unsteadily between their parents' hands. Several skaters closer to Hannibal's age, in sleek garments, practicing their spins and leaps towards the center of the ice. Hannibal regards the rental skates with some mild disapproval but pays, and follows after Mischa as she takes hers to lace them up.

"If you have a liking for it, we may buy you your own," he murmurs, picking at a place on his own skates where the leather has begun to peel.

Mischa is beside herself, wriggling almost too much for Hannibal to tie her laces properly, adjust the way the ankle is supported. But once he's done, he makes quick work of his own and stands, careful to find his center, now that he balances on blades instead of the ground itself. He holds out his hand for Mischa to take, helps her hobble unsteadily and entirely too joyfully towards the ice.

The initial loop is the two of them close to the edge, gaining their balance, growing used to the slip of ice beneath them, finding how to slide without falling and how to propel forward without incident.

The second, Mischa bravely decides to not use the rim of the rink for support and ventures a loop just beside it. Hannibal skates just beside her, careful to keep other - faster - skaters from bowling her over, or her herself from falling.

"I wanted to ask you about Will," Hannibal says at length, can almost feel the grin before he glances down to see it there.

"Yes, you may marry him," Mischa nods sagely, and Hannibal laughs, shakes his head.

"Perhaps a talk for another day of skating," he jests, turning and working his feet in gentle turns to be able to move backwards over the ice, watching his sister.

"But... you do like him? A lot?" she asks, hands seeking before her until Hannibal clasps them in his own and gently turns them, stopping when he has to show Mischa how to move as he had been, the two laughing when she can't quite grasp the concept and Hannibal turns them once to continue their progress as they had been.

"Very much," he agrees, allowing his lip between his teeth for a brief bite before releasing him. "More than I have anyone else, for a long time. Do you like him?"

"For me or for you?" Mischa grins, Hannibal hums, considering.

"I would hope my sister would not be a competitor for his affections," he murmurs, but his smile is genuine as he waits for his answer, still.

Her eyes narrow in thought, focused enough for a moment that her balance slips just a little and she wobbles, arms out straight rather than circling. Hannibal's hands remain outstretched but he doesn't reach for her, observing as she rights herself without help.

"He isn't around ki-," she pauses, and corrects herself with a lift of her chin, "young people very often, is he?"

"I imagine not," Hannibal considers, adding with amusement, "I would suspect he is around dogs more than people, generally."

She grins. "He's always been nice to me. Even when he isn't sure what to say sometimes, he isn't rude at all. He doesn't treat me like a child, or like an adult."

"Oh?"

Mischa nods solemnly. "Sometimes teachers do, I would suspect, because I am precocious."

Ducking his head, Hannibal smiles in earnest and regards her. "You are that."

"Yes," she agrees, "but he doesn't treat me like I am. I like that." She adjusts her stance to turn slowly, watching her feet as she works them closer together and further apart, leaving wave-like patterns in the ice behind her. "And I like how happy he makes you."

Hannibal's smile is small, but the way the corners of his eyes wrinkle says enough. He settles his hands behind his back and they continue to make their way around the rink.

"You also like the dogs," Hannibal ventures, in a tone that would be put-upon were it genuine. Mischa grins so wide Hannibal is almost sure he can count all her teeth.

"I love the dogs," she agrees. "The entire shelter of them. Will's entire pack of them."

"Surely that does not hinder your ability to be objective." Another smile that is more in Hannibal's eyes than in his mouth, and he sets one foot down behind himself to come to a halt on the ice, catching Mischa when she slides into him with a laugh.

"Surely," she grins. Then she hugs him, tight around the middle and they just stay that way for a moment. "I like Will," she repeats. "I like how he is with me, how he is with you. I like that he understands and does not condescend. I like that he comes over and you have time together."

Another mischievous grin and she lets go of her brother.

"I like when you go to his house and Bev babysits."

Hannibal makes a distraught sound and raises his eyes to the ceiling.

"Never again," he murmurs, considering the state he had found his closet, entirely neat and yet fully disheveled.

Mischa hums, tilting her head as she pushes forward and Hannibal turns backward again to watch his sister. "But don't you think," she begins, trying not to laugh when he raises a dubious brow. "Don't you think that it's important that I have women in my life as role-models?"

With a breath of laughter, Hannibal narrows his eyes playfully.

"It's important for development, that young ladies have someone to look up to," declares Mischa, mildly, returning the challenging look with amusement.

"If Miss Katz is your foremost choice for a role-model," Hannibal teases, "I question many of the choices I've made in my life."

Now Mischa laughs, skating forward and trying to reach Hannibal, who skims easily just out of reach. "We had fun," she insists. "It was like a sleepover, like in the books. She can teach me things."

"Such as?"

A pause, and a wide grin. "She taught me how to play poker."

"A most vital skill for young ladies," murmurs Hannibal. "Perhaps, then, in light of the important lessons she could teach you. It is the language she will teach you to which I object."

"You don't mind with Will," Mischa says, expression entirely innocent, and Hannibal nearly falls over at the words, slowing himself to a stop as Mischa finally catches him again, her grin huge before she clarifies. "They're best friends, obviously he swears too."

It's enough to bend Hannibal's knees in a weak surrender to relief, before he simply hoists his sibling up against his hip and sets off around the track again, Mischa spreading her arms as though she's flying.

"Bev doesn't treat me like a kid either," Mischa finally says, as though that settles everything. "I like her, she's smart and she's strong. And I taught her how to play chess in return for poker," she adds.

Hannibal laughs, pretends to groan when he sets his sister down to the ice again and rolls his shoulders.

"I may consider," he says at length, relenting. "I've asked Will to a gala with me, this week, I would rather you not spend the evening alone with Maggie."

Mischa settles against the wall, arms hooked over it. "Perhaps," she suggests in a tone all too much like Hannibal's own, "we might see if Miss Katz is available."

"Perhaps we may."

"We may," Mischa corrects with a little smile, before her brows lift. "A gala?"

Humming, Hannibal skates closer to the wall beside her, and watches as his sister lets her skates slide forward and back again, holding herself up by her arms. "At school."

"Is it very fancy?"

"A little fancy."

"Will you wear a tuxedo?" she asks. "Will he?"

"Suits," he smiles. "Or, I will, at least. I've not taken it upon myself to dictate what he wears."

"You should," she laughs. "Otherwise he'll show up in a t-shirt. He's not like you, Hannibal."

"No," agrees her brother, no less pleased for the thought of it.

"Will you be going out with him very often?" asks Mischa, pushing off the wall and turning in a slow circle, bottom lip held between her teeth. There's a peculiar weight to the question, more so than any of the others she's asked, a gentle avoidance in turning her gaze down towards her feet.

Hannibal watches her carefully, feels himself swallow at the question, the implication and what his answer means for them both.

"I would like to," he says finally, "as often as possible. As often as it does not take my time from you, and from us." Hannibal catches Mischa's arm gently and turns her to him.

"I do not want Will to become a divider," he tells her, voicing a fear he has felt fluttering like birds against his ribs, some days. "I do not want our relationship to suffer for another. I will

not sacrifice what we have built, together, for a happiness that will not benefit us both."

Mischa watches him, her brother, protector, friend, sees him as she always has, a man strong enough for so much and yet always taking on more than he should. She sees him as the man before her now, working and studying and determined to earn his scholarships, not buy them, not spend their inheritance on fees. She sees him also as the teenager making a coin disappear and retrieving it from behind her ear, blowing bubbles at the kitchen sink as he does the dishes, teaching her to dance in the large ballroom of their estate, all the furniture already covered in sheets for travel.

"He makes you happy," she says, "and I owe him the world for that."

Hannibal blinks, feels his lips tilt in a smile as Mischa looks away, fidgets with her shirt before turning back with a smile, a change of direction for their conversation.

"Lend him a suit for the gala. Do you think he'll fidget in it?"

"Like you do in your dresses," Hannibal laughs. "Both of you desperate to return to your casual clothes and pack of dogs."

"You are implying I will have a pack of dogs."

"Not in this house." Hannibal kisses her forehead softly and pushes back on the ice to skid away from his sister, smile wider, playful, before he turns and she finally gives chase.

She laughs, stumbling a little but without falling, pursuing Hannibal who easily turns and shifts just out of her grasp. Twisting to the side, she doesn't fall for the feint but follows his sudden movement, fingers snaring his sweater but outstretched enough that she starts to topple, before her brother catches her, and rights her to her feet.

"Maybe," she grins, breathless, "maybe someday I can help with dogs, too."

"Oh?"

Mischa nods, settling back onto her blades when balanced again, cheeks flushed bright beneath tousled hair. "Like Bev and Will. I could train dogs to help people like me."

The warmth that spreads in Hannibal's chest is almost enough to take his breath away, a gentle hope that fills her words and brightens her eyes. "Not only to have a dozen dogs?" he teases, gently.

"That, too," Mischa muses, pleased. "But not only."

"To help people," Hannibal suggests.

"Yes. Like Winston helps Will," she nods. "Like Maggie's helped me."

They slow a little, and Hannibal takes up her hand. She drifts comfortably beside him, letting him pull her, watching him as he asks, gently, "Has she?"

A small smile, a shift to rest her head against Hannibal’s arm and Mischa nods. "Yeah."

For a while that is a all they say, content to skate together, break apart to chase each other to the middle of the rink and back.

Notably, Hannibal falls first, a misstep that sends him sprawling and Mischa laughing, skating over to him with her arms out for balance. Without a word, he drags her down with him, delighting in the echoing shriek of joy it brings before they can both right themselves.

"She does help, a lot," Mischa says after a while. "She grounds me. She's like a warm weight of a reminder when the other things I see are cold."

Hannibal nods, runs a hand through his hair to both settle and unsettle it, leaving it messy over his forehead. Mischa just grins and adds, "You like her too."

"Who?"

"Maggie."

"Nonsense."

"You bake for her."

"I merely detest the preservatives and added false flavors within store bought things, Mischa, you know this."

"So you bake her treats and you claim not to like her."

"Politeness is a virtue that is sadly becoming extinct In our society, I only wish to preserve it."

"With the dog."

Hannibal laughs, shakes his head. “With family and friends, especially.”

“So she’s your friend,” his sister teases, and Hannibal considers the question with an easy smile.

“Family,” he decides, satisfied as much by the feel of the word itself as the light in Mischa’s eyes when he says it. She watches him a moment more, and steals his hand back into her own, pushing Hannibal’s palm against her flushed cheek to warm it.

“Maybe Will could be family too.”

It isn’t as though Hannibal hasn’t thought of it, but rather that he’s not allowed himself to linger on it, and certainly not with the clarity of language and mind with which Mischa so easily speaks. The relationship - and it is, that, now - is still fresh, still uncertain, and Hannibal has wondered if perhaps his consideration of such an outcome is more a statement of his own need than a reflection of what truly exists at this time.

He wonders if perhaps his sister's question is from the same place as his own thoughts. A desire to build on the stability that they already share, to grow and expand and ease the distance that they feel all too often from the world around them.

"Maybe," Hannibal says simply, running a thumb across her cheek before taking up her hand instead. "But there is always us."

"Always," Mischa agrees, before a ready smile breaks the tension between them, and her eyes narrow. "Now spin me."

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

> He'll just focus on Hannibal, Will decides, stepping through as Hannibal holds the door for him. Speak with him and sip some wine - not a lot, he reminds himself, ever wary - and let Hannibal make the small talk. *Yes, it's beautiful here* and *what do you study* and *are you from the area?* - Will can contribute that much, at least, to keep others talking and allow himself to stay quiet but for the requisite murmurs of assent and acknowledgment.
>
> He can do this.
>
> He's Will fucking Graham.

"You go to *school* here?"

Will has come to a complete stop, still in the damp grass somehow brightly green despite the chill autumn air. He turns in a slow circle, taking in the surrounding buildings rising all broad red brick and golden lights around them, before turning back towards the building at their fore.

Hannibal watches Will more than the campus he knows well enough by now, offering a slight smile as he touches his arm to move them forward again. "Not here, specifically," he answers, amused. "This is the library."

A wry look is sent to him from the shorter man, who bundles deeper into his coat to follow just a step behind Hannibal, some lingering wariness already prickling his senses, out of place in his own mind. He dressed as well as he could manage with what he had when Hannibal's suits proved - to Will's rather salacious delight - too large for his frame. A plainer suit, but tailored well, saved for special occasions that never seem to come.

He had taken Hannibal up on his offer of a tie, however, and Hannibal sees Will - peripherally - reach for it to adjust it and lifts a hand to gently stop his nervous movements.

"Breathe, Will," Hannibal murmurs to him as they join others on the steps, and Will smiles weakly in response, eyes already drawn to the scope of the building's interior, the students and teachers mingling well-dressed and cheerful inside.

A breath, caught in his throat, and Will reaches to grasp Hannibal's sleeve when he reaches for the door. "What do I call you?" he asks, blue eyes bright behind his glasses, an anxious laugh perched on his lips.

Hannibal smiles, lets his eyes linger on Will's lips as he bites them nervously, as his entire body coils and uncoils trying to understand what it's doing here, at this campus, with this man, seen and shown and adored.

"You may prefer the term 'partner' over 'boyfriend'," Hannibal offers, amused, watching Will's cheeks darken as the rest of him pales - quite a fetching look, though he does not torment Will with the compliment at the door. "Alternatively, my name will suffice. Everyone here knows it."

"Shit."

Hannibal laughs, brings a hand up to soothe Will's hair. "I suppose if it comes to it, I can answer to that as well."

"No. Fuck. Sorry. I just. I've - I don't -" Will bites his lip, sighs, takes a breath. "I have not been to one of these before."

Hannibal's eyes wrinkle at the corners, a soft expression, warm, and utterly adoring. He wants to kiss him, to hold Will softly against him and reassure him that everything will be alright, that this is just a gathering to mark the end of specialty exams, to introduce certain students to others, and more than anything else, a chance for everyone to drink and enjoy the beautiful library after hours.

He does not kiss him.

"I would want no one else at my side, for this," he assures him, draws his nails softly over Will's scalp before letting him go and reaching for the door again, waiting for the small nod before he opens it.

He'll just focus on Hannibal, Will decides, stepping through as Hannibal holds the door for him. Speak with him and sip some wine - not a lot, he reminds himself, ever wary - and let Hannibal make the small talk. *Yes, it's beautiful here* and *what do you study* and *are you from the area?* - Will can contribute that much, at least, to keep others talking and allow himself to stay quiet but for the requisite murmurs of assent and acknowledgment.

He can do this.

He's Will fucking Graham.

If he can train therapy dogs and he can clear a full round through center mass and he can - somehow - find himself regularly entangled with Baltimore's most charming not-yet doctor, then he can sure as shit do this.

And he's no sooner inside than every thought he's managed to wrestle into something like confidence halts along with his breath.

Will's eyes seek immediately upwards, higher and higher, taking in the exquisite expanse of library that makes the school's exterior pale by comparison. He counts five stories before reaching the glass ceiling overhead, each level exposed to the central with balustrades and

bannisters that behind them run deep with rows and rows of books. Golden lights glow like candles, illuminating Grecian columns and reflecting bright from the polished marble floor, and where the tables for studying might normally be there are people now instead, interspersed with servers bearing food and drink.

He only remembers to breathe when Hannibal's hand settles against the small of his back, even that gentle touch enough to startle him, and he adjusts his glasses - a defense mechanism, certainly - higher on his nose.

"Christ," he mutters to Hannibal, almost conspiratorial. "Are you sure -"

"The first time I came in here," Hannibal confides, steering Will, still, with a hand soft against his lower back, "I almost tripped over one of the study tables, I had my head angled up so high."

His hand curves soft around Will's side, a reassuring touch despite Will's tension at it, before he lets him go, stops and takes in the crowd as a server approaches them with glasses of champagne. Hannibal takes up two glasses, holding one out to Will, and watching him drink it quickly with a smile. His own, Hannibal sips slowly, drawing his lips gently together after, to savor the taste.

Not the best quality, but acceptable, certainly, for an evening like this.

"I cannot help but think how you would soothe an animal panicked so," Hannibal asks Will at length, still gentle, still soft, as the young man blinks at him from behind his glasses.

"I'm not panicked," he counters, and his smile is genuine, warming Hannibal's own further. "I am merely considering whether or not my coming here was a wise decision. Not your choice to bring me, but my coming. Underdressed and underprepared -"

"You are doing splendidly," Hannibal reassures him softly.

"- surrounded by more books than I have ever seen in my life."

Hannibal laughs, his smile showing his teeth as it so rarely does, as he watches Will and listens to him. He sounds at once entirely awed and terrified, concerned and intrigued. Hannibal imagines, remembers, coming in here for the first time, and allows for the added nerves of not being a student here, not 'belonging' in the most obvious and meaningless sense of the word.

He catches the eye of one of his professors and offers a smile as the other nods.

Will finds himself nodding as well, though he doesn't know the man, and the man doesn't know him, and Will stifles a sigh into his glass. "At least it's a nice backdrop to look at you all night," he murmurs, a hint of a smile in his eyes as he takes another - slower - sip. "A bit more suitable than Wolf Trap."

"Wolf Trap is more than," responds Hannibal warmly, taking up slow strides to circulate with no endpoint in mind, pleased enough to have Will at his side.

It isn't long at all - a few steps deeper into the party - when Hannibal is caught lightly by the arm.

"You made it!"

A pretty girl with wide blue eyes and big brown curls of hair catches Hannibal in a friendly hug, her own glass balanced in her other hand. "You never come to these things," she grins. "Too busy making sure your name's always first on the results."

"The moment I relent, I'll be surpassed by you," he responds, amused.

She laughs lightly. "Does that mean I should cut out early to get ahead in studying?"

"It would be a conflict of interest to suggest you do anything but stay, late, and enjoy yourself," answers Hannibal, earning another laugh before stepping back, just a little, to open the conversation and make introductions. "Will, this is Alana Bloom. Second year, studying psychiatry."

Will starts forward a little, hand extended to shake hers, inwardly cursing himself as he does - for the formality, for the blush he knows has risen hot in his cheeks. "Will Graham," he offers, and his lips part in silence when he realizes he has no particular title to add to it.

Alana does not seem to mind, or particularly notice, the awkward pause, and takes Will's hand with a smile.

"Nice to meet you. I do hope Hannibal isn't coercing you from your chosen major to start medicine, he is notorious for new recruits. He is the most sought-after mentor for first years."

Hannibal smiles and tilts his head, turning to Will to give him a delighted, narrow-eyed look. "Perhaps I can convince him to come to these more often to be converted. But alas, for the time being, my partner is happily employed training and working with service animals."

Alana blinks and then her smile widens. "You work with service animals!"

"Alana did one of her papers last year on therapy dogs and the benefit of a canine presence for the elderly," Hannibal explains, taking a sip of his champagne as Alana bombards Will with questions, delighted to have someone to discuss this with, happy to include Will in the conversation so quickly.

"Do you train them from six weeks?" she asks. "Both cats and dogs?"

"Cats and dogs," Will confirms, with a lasting smile from Hannibal's gentle introduction. "Age, ah - it depends. The service animals, yes - you've got to teach them a lot when they're young enough to take to it, but most of the therapy animals are rescues." He draws a breath, brief, concerned already that he's carried on too much, but her enthusiasm only grows.

Will finds that soon he's responding just as eagerly. A topic with which Will is particularly comfortable, they talk at length about his practice and her theory, though when asked how he began, Will uses Bev as his tried-and-true excuse rather than mentioning his previous career.

He feels Hannibal's hand settle softly against his back as he gestures towards a server, a touch too subtle to draw notice from anyone but Will.

"You could stop by," Will offers, accepting with a wider smile the glass that Hannibal exchanges for his empty one. "Meet the animals, meet my partner." A pause, and Will can't help but relish his own correction as he adds, "My other partner."

"If I wouldn't be getting in the way," Alana responds brightly, "I would love to see how you work."

"Trade me a layman's lesson in psychiatry," offers Will, amused, "so I can keep up with this one."

"Perhaps enough to understand him," Alana laughs. "I can barely keep up with him, he's too clever for his own good."

Hannibal accepts the compliment with a sip from his glass to hide his smile and Alana gives him another comfortable hug before turning to give Will the same.

"There are so many people I have to see this evening, I hate that I have to leave good company to do it," she laments, turns to Will with narrowed eyes. "We will get in touch regarding the shelter. I'll make sure of it." Then, with a brief flick of her hair, she is off, like a whirlwind, leaving both young men smiling in her wake.

"Certain people," Hannibal comments gently, eyes down to his glass, "make the studying and countless extra hours of lab time well worth the effort. Alana Bloom is one of them."

He gives Will a brief look, finds the man beaming, though still nervous, still almost confused as to how something so good had happened without repercussion. He cannot resist leaning in to kiss the side of Will's face gently, hand settling against his back again.

"Will you endure with me?" he asks him softly. "Just for an hour more?"

The kiss brings a blush blooming over Will's nose, but he doesn't resist it, and leans just a little closer. Settling in to the rhythm of the party, one conversation successfully completed, and Hannibal at his side, Will allows his shoulder to lean into the man for a moment more as he congratulates himself silently with a long sip of champagne.

"I think I can manage that," Will agrees, surprised to find that he means it, rather than balks at the thought of another hour here. His answer earns another kiss, and he bites back a grin, lip caught between his teeth.

He's Will fucking Graham, he reminds himself, and he can do this.

There is little need to circulate now, a series of brief conversations from those who seek out Hannibal, or pass him and stop to say hello. Will listens with interest to the mutterings of a professor, to whom he takes an immediate liking with his gruff grumblings about how every year they cut back on the quality of champagne a little more, and sudden shifts of

conversation to recent publications of which he disagrees, decidedly because he doesn't like the doctors who wrote them.

He also swears in a way that puts Will to shame, and Will has to press his teeth against his glass to keep from grinning as Hannibal maintains his perfect composure - of course - despite his unpredictable conversational partner.

"You should have him over to the house," Will decides, watching with tremendous amusement as the professors soldiers on to avoid another teacher making her way towards him. "I don't think he noticed I was here though. Or much beyond your attentiveness to his complaining."

"A brilliant researcher," confers Hannibal, leaning lower to Will, "who has in that what he lacks in his bedside manner." Will hardly has time to laugh before a sinuous voice slips between them.

"Hannibal, have you finally taken on another freshman to mentor?" intones the man.

It's one of those moments Will has, when he's certain of something beyond any doubt, and has to rewind his thoughts to figure out how he got there. The lift of the man's chin, the way he draws up his shoulders to appear taller, despite his obviously absent inches beneath Hannibal, and the sharpness in the curve of his smile.

A student, Will is certain in an instant, and a rival.

"If he has, it isn't me," Will answers, extending a hand now that he's settled on that not being as formal as he'd initially feared. "I'm his partner. Will Graham. I train dogs."

A blink, genuine surprise behind the smarmy facade, before the man regards Will's hand and finally takes it. Hannibal watches, hiding his delight behind another swallow of champagne, already warm in his blood and comfortably so. He will not have another, but he will relish this.

"Will, this is Frederick Chilton. A worthy classmate of note."

Frederick sends Hannibal a look of unsuppressed irritation before retrieving his hand from Will's grasp.

"A pleasure, to be sure. Unusual for Hannibal to ever attend these get-togethers and with a partner in tow," he hums, the end of his sentence left to hang for interpretation.

Will blinks, a dour validation in finally getting the reaction he had been waiting for all night and had been blissfully surprised not to receive. He doesn't address it directly, but manages an earnest smile as he considers his own words and the truth of them. "I'll take it as a compliment, then, that he deigned to attend with me," responds Will, gently amused.

The man is not a fool. Will can nearly see the wheels turning as Chilton takes in the interplay between Hannibal and Will, much as Will studies Chilton himself. A preternatural awareness

- a survival mechanism for them both - of social nuance and body language, structure and form of contact and conversation.

The difference between them is that unlike Will, always an unwilling participant, Chilton enjoys these games - Will guesses - by rigging them in his favor, certain that Hannibal's choice of partner has been filed away in his mind with priority.

"He has very exacting expectations, our Hannibal - the highest standards," Chilton answers, letting his words settle comfortably between praising and patronizing. "Did you say you train dogs?"

"Therapy dogs," Hannibal confirms, allowing Will a moment more to gather himself, feeling that nervousness from earlier creep into him, and at the same time a strange strength try to quell it, push it down. It's a subtle movement, but Hannibal brushes his fingers against Will's back, between his shoulders, and he seems to almost wake up from the gesture.

"How quaint." Chilton's smile would look natural to anyone who had not seen one before. "Looking just to the outskirts of the field but always staying within it." He turns his attention to Will again, a very brief skim with his eyes to determine the man worthy or far from it before he continues. "Hannibal and I were both contending for the scholarship this year. Medicine is such a competitive field, after all."

Hannibal hums, another skim of his fingers against Will's back and another sip of champagne. "I suppose we will see who is the wiser, come results day."

"If only it was a matter of wisdom," Chilton smirks, "rather than rote memorization."

"Hannibal has an excellent memory," Will adds, mildly, drawing a look from Chilton that would be sharper were the man not so specifically in control of his reactions. Will meets his eyes with a polite smile, small. "But good luck."

Will shifts his shoulders, just a slight adjustment to press himself gently back against Hannibal's hand, lingering there in comfort, in reassurance, though Will is pleased to find that he's not so much in need of it as he was. Rather, he feels a peculiar pride, that the clever man at his side has chosen Will to be here rather than any other.

"Unnecessary," responds Chilton, before adding with a well-trained smile of his own, "but appreciated. How did you two meet? I'm not certain I've ever seen Hannibal outside of the library, lab, or lecture hall. No dogs allowed there," he adds, tilting his head in a wry amusement.

"Would that medicine were only rote learning and memorization," Will replies, glass up to his lips as he regards Chilton with a smile before he licks his lips and continues. "I believe Hannibal was seeking to understand other forms and methods of therapy available post surgery and came across my shelter."

"Mischa was very interested in the dogs," Hannibal adds and Will nods, adjusting his stance that his hip is cocked, his chin raised, a more dominant action than either of them - though Will certainly more so - had thought him capable in such a situation.

“Mischa was very interested in the dogs,” Will agrees, reassured that she could be brought into conversation without repercussion, “and he happened to be interested in the process of therapy. A general inquiry became frequent visits, and a future surgeon now has another avenue of recommendation should his patients require it.”

Will shrugs, smile reaching his eyes now, and turns to Hannibal. The other swallows, just barely, but it’s enough for Will to understand that perhaps accidentally, perhaps entirely without meaning to, he had schooled a man who so often thought himself the smartest in the room.

“Charming. Longs walks in the dog park together,” Chilton trails off, sipping his champagne before meeting Hannibal’s eyes again, a lingering amusement despite the turn in conversation. “Maybe you’ll be inspired towards a new career path, Hannibal. Veterinary surgery.”

“A patient is a patient,” answers Will with a mild shrug and a genial smile. “Or do you consider one as having more value than the other?”

It’s a quick rejoinder, and Chilton gives Hannibal - rather than Will - a look of amusement as he is, very literally, spoken for. Hannibal’s expression only softens with a comfortable pleasure, as though the conversation at hand were actually as friendly as it appears on the surface, rather than poked through with verbal fencing.

“Honestly?” Chilton asks. Though Will doubts the man often is, Will nods anyway, brows lifted with interest. “I think it’s naive to compare the two,” Chilton continues, before interrupting himself to add, “which - of course - isn’t to say I wouldn’t do my utmost were I pursuing veterinary medicine.” He gives another wry glance towards Hannibal, “But the worth of a human life, the difficulty in repairing it, you must agree comes with a much greater responsibility.”

“I think the dog in question would disagree,” Will muses.

Hannibal returns Chilton’s smile, and it seems to not be the answer the man was expecting, clear enough in his own faltering look before Chilton smooths his expression effortlessly once more, and turns away.

“Enjoy your evening,” Will tells him, when the man is still within earshot. “Everyone deserves a night free from saving lives.”

Chilton pauses only a moment before continuing on his way, finding another colleague to greet almost instantly and distracting from the conversation he had thought would go so well. Hannibal sets his glass - now empty - to the tray a passing waiter carries and leans closer to whisper against Will’s ear.

“Would you think less of me if I suddenly felt a hunger for a wall against my back and your leg between my own?” he asks, feeling Will tense pleasantly at the words. “You will be the end of me, speaking as you do.”

He grins when Will turns to look at him, eyes narrowed, attention entirely on Will. “I must admit I have never once been defended in such a way.”

“What an ass,” Will mutters, watching Chilton as he insinuates himself into another conversation. “Though from what I’ve heard about surgeons, he’s more the rule, and you’re the exception.”

Will’s cheeks warm from the champagne and the social sparring and Hannibal’s low-spoken words all at once. He swirls the dregs of his drink and finishes it, setting it aside before turning his body to face Hannibal, close enough that he’s nearly leaning against him.

“It would be wrong for me not to defend what’s mine,” Will muses, close enough to Hannibal’s ear that the taller man can feel his breath against it. “Especially when what’s mine is so very worth defending from so many outside interests.”

His teasing tone gives way to a bitten lip and an earnest grin, leaning back from the slight rise onto his toes to meet Hannibal’s eyes. “Thank you for bringing me,” he says, adding with amusement, “and showing me off.”

He tilts his head up enough for their lips to brush, a chaste kiss but sweet enough that it sends Will’s heart racing, and prompts him to add, eyes narrowing in pleasure, “Is this the part where we go make out in the stacks?”

“They are renovating the third floor so the option is open,” Hannibal replies, smile wide and hands against Will’s sides before he kisses him again and turns to face the crowd again. “But, perhaps, you will be patient for your reward for later this evening. All in the anticipation.”

The rest of the evening passes well, Will has another glass to drink and Hannibal takes great pleasure in claiming Will as his, and being claimed in turn. It’s unusual for him to be so social, despite Frederick’s deliberate attempt at painting his study habits in a bad light, he was not inaccurate in his observations. Hannibal’s routine rarely varies between studying at school to studying at home, working when there is a demand for him, and taking care of Mischa.

Varied, he supposes, is now more accurate. He has happily reduced his study for time with Will, has found it far more enjoyable to wake to company - and especially to Will’s, who seems entirely possessed by instinct until he has at least two cups of coffee in him.

“I believe the general consensus is for you to enroll here,” Hannibal tells Will with a soft smile, standing just out of the way in one of the arched alcoves.

Will laughs, surprised by how easily the sound comes now when only hours before he was ready to bolt. It happens more and more this way, in the time shared between them, that Hannibal has proved a soothing presence even against the formidable wall of nervous energy with which Will surrounds himself. He catches Hannibal’s fingers in his own, letting the touch linger between them, concerns quieted entirely as to who might see them or what they might say.

“Never a good enough student for it,” he responds, though the invitation is enough to warm his cheeks again. “It wasn’t the material, but more the habits. Besides,” he grins, “one doctor between the two of us is more than enough.”

Hannibal turns their hands together, palm to palm for a gentle squeeze. “Not-yet doctor,” he corrects, and Will sighs a laugh against the back of Hannibal’s hand when he brings it to his lips for a fond kiss.

“But you like what I do, don’t you?” Will asks, the answer to the question already lighting his eyes as he watches him. “You’re proud of me.”

“What you do is invaluable,” Hannibal tells him, bringing his free hand up to curl around the back of Will’s head to hold him close. “I am very proud of you, and very proud to present you as mine.”

They linger together for a moment, just close, before Will closes his eyes and Hannibal leans closer to press their foreheads together, contented and warm and near. Around them, the evening is winding down, people coming and going now with quick hellos and passing goodbyes to the people they did not get a chance to talk to.

Hannibal considers the people they had met, the people he could call his friends, for the fact that they spend so much time together and enjoy the company. Beyond that, though, they all know each other very little. He thinks of how they had accepted Will quickly, not only as a partner, a plus-one, but for his own merits, of which there are many. He thinks how, for the first time in a long while, he has felt truly contented, thanks to the man stepping closer now to be cradled against him.

“We could make a quick exit,” Hannibal suggests with a smile, nuzzling soft against Will before pulling back to see him, “before another sees fit to catch us.”

“I think we’ve impressed everyone enough for tonight,” Will agrees, biting his lip to resist leaning close enough to kiss again, instead letting it play pleasurably through his thoughts as they make their way out into the cold night once again. Will stays close to Hannibal, arms folded against the chill, and shoulder near enough to brush against the taller man’s as they cross the grass towards the lot where the Bentley sits waiting.

“Turn on the seats,” Will chirps, dropping eagerly into the passenger side and immediately toeing off his shoes to push his socked feet beneath the heater. Hannibal does, watching as Will shivers in cold and heat and delight all at once, reaching only to stroke Will’s hair when he finds himself pinned beneath his mouth instead.

“Do you know how hard it was not to just drag you away and peel you out of that suit?” Will asks, pushing his fingers past Hannibal’s cheeks and into his hair, eyes dark and glittering amusement as he leans back, just enough to keep away, when Hannibal comes nearer.

Hannibal keeps his expression as neutral as he can, bare amusement there, just enough of a blush to his cheeks from the cold outside to be fetching, to draw Will’s gaze.

“As hard as it was for me not to point out the back staircase leading to the third floor? I don’t know,” he muses, eyes narrowing, biting the inside of his lip softly. “Perhaps not as -” The kiss steals his words and Hannibal is more than happy to surrender them, hands up against Will, feeling the cold melt from his cheeks as the car heats, laughing softly against his lips as Will kneels on his seat and leans deeper into Hannibal.

From there it’s warm hands and quick fingers, tugging down Hannibal’s tie to work the buttons of his shirt, Hannibal’s hands up against Will’s waist, pushing up beneath his jacket and shirt to feel the warm skin there, his own fingers marginally colder, making Will shiver with the sensation.

They aren’t alone, entirely, other party-goers seeking out their own cars in the lot, but for all they care, they may as well be. Blame it on the champagne, blame it on youth, it matters not to either nor stills their eager hands and ready mouths, grinning between smothering kisses as they finally take their fill of each other.

Will splays his hands across Hannibal’s chest, curling his fingers against the soft hair that he adores so much. Twisted awkward and needy across the center console, they shift until Hannibal’s shoulders are nearly set against the window and Will turns Hannibal’s head aside with a warm hand to bare his neck and works his kisses downward, a heated trail of lips and tongue and teeth until he reaches Hannibal’s chest and nuzzles with a laugh.

“How did I get so fucking lucky?” Will wonders aloud, a thought given unintentional voice like so many when Will is in this way, pulse drumming a quick tempo beneath his skin. “The way they admire you, Hannibal - respect and desire and the way they all looked at you,” he murmurs, eyes turning upward beneath new mussed hair. “And all I could think was that - *somehow* - you want *me*.”

The flush over Hannibal’s face is nothing to do with the cold, now, as he watches Will, disheveled and wanton and grinning at him, against him, so close.

“How could I want anyone else?” he asks, breathless, one hand leaving dark pink marks over Will’s back, the other fumbling with the control on the door to lock all the doors against inquisitive passers-by seeking to know if he’s alright being pinned to the side of his car. More than. He is more than alright.

“They are not used to facing charisma, too used to study and expectation, and you were a *vision* in there,” Hannibal murmurs, delighting in how the words bring Will closer, hotter against him, lips parting over a nipple as Hannibal closes his eyes and arches up.

Part of him wants to know how far this will go, pressed so close in so confined - and open - a space, and another wants to feel cool sheets against his back, wants to bunch them between desperate fingers as Will drives into him and whispers utterly divine dirty things into his ear.

Teasing with his teeth, sucking enough to feel Hannibal’s nipple peak against his tongue, Will pushes his other hand up the man’s bared chest to tease the other with his fingers, scrapes of nail and light pinches, until Hannibal’s breath grows shorter and more vocal, hands trembling where they rest against Will’s skin.

He releases him, breathless, panting as hard as Hannibal as he cups his cheek, eyes wide with wild delight. “Christ,” he breathes. “You have to know how fucking beautiful you are, right? How brilliant. Talented. In so many ways,” Will laughs, a low sound as he presses a hand between Hannibal’s legs and bites his lip, moaning behind his teeth to feel how hard Hannibal - his boyfriend, his *partner* - has become.

Before Hannibal can raise a protest, Will spreads their lips together, tongues as entangled as their bodies are becoming between the seats. Like a thing possessed, Will is shameless with adoration, want and need, and pushes to his knees before sliding a leg across and dragging himself into Hannibal’s lap to straddle him.

He holds Hannibal’s face in his hands, stroking one back over his hair to clear it from his dark eyes, before pushing into another long kiss, separating only enough to intone, softly, “Hannibal.”

“Will?”

“I am going to fuck you so hard.”

Hannibal makes a sound, an almost helpless moaning thing and bites his lip, hands down to hold against Will’s hips, under his shirt, fingers working to slide beneath his waistband as he lets the words slip beneath his skin and into his blood. There has never been a moment, since they had started this, that he has not wanted Will so much his entire body sang with it. But like this, with his filthy words and dirty tone, Hannibal can barely resist him.

He wonders why he even tries, why he even bothers, when Will is straddling him like this, half dressed, and telling him exactly what he’s going to do to him…

“Fuck.” It’s a sigh, a click in his throat, and it earns a purring laugh from Will before he kisses against Hannibal’s jaw, down beneath it. Hannibal blinks, stares at the ceiling of the Bentley and forces his mind to work beyond the “now, need, now, here, *him*” mantra that runs so quick through him like a second pulse.

“Home,” he gasps, licks his lips, bites against one. “Home and in bed, with the dogs outside or upstairs… in bed where I can spread for you, take you as deep as you can go -” Hannibal makes another sound, helpless, as Will strokes between his legs again. “Will -” It’s a prayer, a worship, and Will has never heard his name that way before. “Will, please… let’s go to yours…”

They won’t make it to the bed, Will decides, sucking a rough kiss against Hannibal’s neck to pull another moan from him, another plea of his name, to mark Hannibal as his for everyone to see when he returns to class the next day. Coats half-removed, they’ll spill to the floor and Will’s hands will pin him there, strip him bare and feel him stretch, gasping, as -

As Matthew looks on, smirking, and asks to join.

“Fuck,” Will hisses, forcing himself away from Hannibal with enough force that he sounds the horn, blaring loud into the lot and startling a small group gathered several cars over. Will frowns at them, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth. He has to tell him, he knows he

does, but the words come in a jumble, addled with drink and desire and dismay - *no big deal, there's a friend staying with me, no you can't meet him because he's just going to make crude innuendos about my cock, no really just a friend…*

Will grinds his hand against his eyes, unsettling his glasses, and sighs, stomach tightening miserably at the thought of telling Hannibal now and disrupting what had - until this moment - been one of the nicest nights Will has ever had.

He leans in and brushes a kiss against Hannibal's mouth, lips closing sweetly against his and hands settling against Hannibal's shoulders. "Tomorrow?" he asks, nuzzling the man's cheek. "The house is a mess, I have to take care of the dogs…"

A groan from Hannibal this time, arching up against Will where he sits straddling him still, a teasing promise Hannibal wants immediately fulfilled.

"Tease," he sighs, kissing Will back, drawing a hand through his hair and holding him close to kiss him again. "Cruel. I take back every nice thing I said about you." Hannibal laughs as Will bites him gently, whispers another apology as they both force their hearts to slow from the delicious game of before. Then Hannibal just nuzzles against him, hums.

"I can drive you to your car," he tells him gently, smiling when Will presses closer. "Not with you on my lap, but the theoretical offer remains if you wish for it."

"What was it you said before?" Will murmurs, leaning into another soft kiss, sliding his palms onto Hannibal's cheeks to keep them near each other. "All in the anticipation."

With a roll of his hips to push them together once more, Will sighs and clumsily frees himself from between Hannibal and the steering wheel, to drop slouching back into the passenger seat. His smile remains, though he knows it's died down with the savagery of the knots looping tight in his stomach, his ardor cooled as suddenly as it started.

If you're not honest, you're being dishonest.

He rubs his hands beneath his glasses again and straps on the belt, one leg still draped across the console, a sock clad foot hanging over Hannibal's leg. The words - jumbled and pressing and apologetic - stretch against his ribs and tighten his lungs, beg to be spoken but Will can't find the breath for them. Not now that he's lied, or so it feels, made that much worse when Hannibal settles his hand against Will's leg.

They drive in relative quiet, but for the heater humming and the car purring beneath them, to return Will to his car, left parked by the shop. Only then does Will reach for Hannibal again, catching the fingers that have softly stroked his leg for the length of the ride. He brings them to his mouth and begs apology in silence before kissing them.

"I had a great time tonight," Will tells him, watching Hannibal from the seat that he's so reluctant to leave.

Hannibal spreads his fingers against Will's lips before leaning in to kiss him, just a soft thing, grateful.

“As did I. Thank you for coming with me.” Both are tired, now, the evening’s events slowly seeping beneath the skin and deeper still. Hannibal kisses Will again. “Go home. Tend to the dogs, let them nest on you as they so often do. Perhaps I will see you tomorrow?” Amusement curling Hannibal’s lips as Will nods and Hannibal slowly matches to nod back.

Another brief brush of lips and he lets Will go, to wriggle back into his shoes, and watches him with a smile.

“Tomorrow,” Will agrees, stealing another kiss, and another, before reluctantly dragging himself away from Hannibal. Will’s eyes soften, a look of longing there remarkably akin to that of his dogs when left for the day, and he offers a smile, and a small wave once inside his car, watching as the Bentley pulls away without him in it.

He manages to wait until it’s turned the block before a barrage of hissed curses breaks free, head against the steering wheel and fingernails digging marks into it. *Fuck this, fuck me, fuck Matt, fuck fuck fuck* until he’s expelled as much of his guilt as he can, knowing that it will remain and grow for as long as it takes him to tell Hannibal.

Will considers calling Bev, but knows Hannibal will be with her before Will could possibly sputter out all the reasons that he is a goddamn disaster, and resists.

Tomorrow. He’ll tell him tomorrow.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> “Busy day?” Matt asks. Always unable to allow a silence to last too long without filling it with words, with touch, with himself, body angled always towards Will as Matt watches him rummage through the food. “Thought if you’re not busy we could just, y’know, hang out. Watch a game or something -”
>
> Will closes the fridge with a snap and keeps his hand against it a moment longer. Why are these things overpowering him now? Why must he see and remember and ache and want? He had told himself he would explain to Hannibal today, that he would find a way to tell him.
>
> He just needs to get out of the house, that's all.
>
> Just get out of the house.

Chapter Notes

> Friendly heads-up that this chapter includes a Brownham flashback, so if that's not your thing, we might suggest skipping to the end to see how Will resolves the tension at hand!

It all starts because Will is not quick enough out of the house before Matt leaves the shower.

He can claim that it starts far before that, but he decides the shower is the easiest thing to blame on a cold Saturday, when his only errands were to get the groceries and keep the dogs from drowning in mud. And keep himself, apparently, from cataloging the new tattoos all over Matt’s torso as he bends to scratch one of the dogs behind the ears when they intercept him on his way out of the bathroom, aromatic steam filling the house in his wake.

Maybe Will should blame the sleepless night on the couch, knowing he had not told Hannibal the night before, that he should, and would, today.

Maybe he should blame himself, but that would be easy, too easy, when he can blame Matt instead. For coming here in the first place, for letting Will leave, initially.

So Will stands with his mug of coffee poised between counter and lips - parted, until he finally closes them - and in the back of his mind he remembers how each of Matt’s old tattoos

felt against his tongue, how they tasted. And wonders if the new ones will still be tender when sucked.

He makes a sound that he realizes in his mind were words, and sets the coffee down, turning away to check the stove.

“Pig Latin?” Matt asks, amused, and Will frowns when he turns back.

“Going to get groceries,” he enunciates, clearer this time when he isn’t swallowing his tongue. “Do you need anything?”

“You’re low on shampoo,” answers Matt, hitching his towel higher to no great effect when it settles precariously around his hips again. “Could use more dog food. Not for me,” he amends with a smirk, seeking out a mug to pour himself coffee. “Beer would be great, though. Not for the dogs.”

Will can’t resist a slight smile, though he stalwartly resists turning towards Matt who stands so particularly close to him now, radiating warmth from bare skin heated beneath a too-hot shower. “Pabst, still?”

“They gave it the blue ribbon for a reason,” Matt grins, spooning enough sugar into his coffee to nearly spill it over the edges. “You?”

“Same,” admits Will. “Still.”

“Not onto the fancy stuff yet?” asks Matt. He leans against the counter beside Will, and doesn’t pretend not to notice when Will’s eyes drift towards the ridges of his stomach and then quickly turn away again.

“Better whiskeys,” Will manages. “More scotch now.”

“Well,” laughs Matt, “that is an improvement over - what was it?”

“*Old Crow*.” Will offers out the bottle, still in its paper bag, over his shoulder. Matthew takes it with an approving grunt but sets it aside against the peeling laminate counter, to snare Will around the waist instead and pull the smaller man against him. “Christ,” snorts Will, “you smell like death.”

“I hope not,” blinks Matthew, before burying his face against the back of Will’s neck, hungry kisses pressed with teeth and lips. “Last I saw, we saved the guy.”

Will makes a sound, bends the way he’s held to feel Matt against him closer, from shoulders to thighs, with hot kisses up behind his ear now, sending his knees to shaking. It’s been a long day, a stupid case finally closed and paperwork to boot, and then Matt had called…

“Yeah, we saved him,” Will agrees, bringing a hand back to feel that spiky, coarse hair against his palm, between his fingers, “Means we get the next day off for good behavior, that I plan *not* to live up to.”

He curls his fingers tighter, tugs, feels Matt's teeth sharp against his skin and rocks back against him in encouragement. There is something, always, about watching Matt work that sends Will's blood entirely to heat; those hands, gloved when he can manage it, bloody, stitching someone back together, keeping them alive as his smooth accent lulls them to somewhere that isn't on his table.

"You gonna tell work to fuck off?" he asks, knowing the schedule for Matt isn't as lenient when it comes to time to recuperate.

"A mental health day," Matt laughs, hot against Will's shoulder where he tugs his shirt free enough to bare it. "Wouldn't want the city's finest first responders to burn out, right?"

He pulls Will back against him and turns him, hoists Will up onto the counter and sends the meager bag of groceries rolling behind him. Leaning up now, Matthew presses a hard kiss to Will's mouth, biting his lower lip and tugging before releasing him when Will's hands press against his cheeks.

"Better excuse than 'sorry, too busy sticking it to the hottest cop in the Seventh Ward'," Matt grins.

"They might even get jealous," Will muses, grinning and curling his legs around Matt's to bring him closer, catching his balance around Will, hands on the counter. "I'll fucking burn you out," he mutters, eyes narrowed, pulling back just enough to have Matt chase his lips before he allows the brutal kiss again, moaning into it, as Winston meanders through the door after them and heads straight for the fallen groceries to investigate...

"Nothing else?" Will's hands are curled a little too hard behind Winston's ears and the dog whines, Will letting go immediately to soothe the hurt with gentle circles with his fingertips. He wonders when he's shown up, drawn, as always, to Will's tension and nervous energy.

"I'm kinda short right now," Matt shrugs, resting his hand back against the counter behind him to lean into a slight stretch. "I can make do with whatever."

"That's not an answer."

"Sure it is," grins Matt, curiously challenging as he turns towards the counter instead now, holding onto the edge to lean over it at sincere risk of losing his towel entirely. Showing off - preening - in front of Will, and entirely aware of how hard Will works to pretend he doesn't notice. "Whatever, then, I mean -"

Will turns a look to him, brow arched, and Matt sighs, relaxing back onto his heels and scrubbing a hand through his hair. "Fine," Matt answers. "Shit for sandwiches, I guess? You're kind of out in the middle of nowhere, kid - little hard to get takeout."

"You just said you were broke," Will responds, dry.

"I said I'm *short*," corrects Matt, swilling half his coffee at once before offering another shrug and a crooked smile to accompany it. "Man's gotta eat."

Will considers him a moment more before letting out a long breath, and taking a sip of his own coffee, eyes down and allowing himself to follow the curve of thigh beneath the towel before he turns away towards the fridge, checking what he has left. There is a familiar sensation, like a tickling up his spine, knowing that Matt is at his back, that he is just as obviously watching Will, though not at all trying to hide it.

He feels the familiar pleasure at being appreciated. Like a caress, like warm fingers down his spine…

"*Fuck!*" Will hisses, draws his knees higher as Matthew brings his fingers to rest at Will's sides, almost ticklish if it wasn't for the nails so obviously pressed against skin. "Don't you fucking start," Will growls, grinning as he's pulled closer to the edge of the counter, so that he is sitting precariously against it and resting most of his weight on the man in front of him, who seems determined to devour him, teeth parted wide over Will's neck. "Don't you dare draw blood, I'll have to explain that shit to Jack again -"

"Oh yeah?"

"Mauled by a fucking dog," Will laughs, gathers Matt's shirt into messy handfuls and takes advantage of the man laughing with him to yank it off and toss it away before pulling him close again. "Winston shouldn't have to suffer for your shit."

"Winston," Matt chides the dog, who tilts his head in response. "No biting Will. That's my job."

"Winston, don't listen to Matt, he's an idiot," counters Will, before spanning his hands up the tight curves of Matthew's chest, all muscle sharply honed beneath smooth skin. He tightens his legs around the man's narrow waist, nearly purring when Matt grinds hard against him in response, and lowers his arms again only to allow Matt to finally push off the shirt he's skillfully unbuttoned somewhere between biting and scratching.

"I thought you said I smell like death," Matt snorts, eyes closing with a groan as Will sinks kisses against his neck.

"Nothing new then," Will teases. He loops his arms around Matt's neck and squints at him, quirking a smile when Matt squints back in return. "So are you just going to fuck me here or are we going to bed, like civilized people?"

"You're not fucking civilized - look at you, spilling groceries everywhere." A pause, and Matt grins sharply. "I could civilize you."

"Oh?"

"Spank you 'til you fucking cry," Matt responds before snaring Will into another kiss and dragging him off the counter, hoisted around his hips. "And then fuck you anyway."

"Busy day?" Matt asks. Always unable to allow a silence to last too long without filling it with words, with touch, with himself, body angled always towards Will as Matt watches him

rummage through the food. “Thought if you’re not busy we could just, y’know, hang out. Watch a game or something -”

Will closes the fridge with a snap and keeps his hand against it a moment longer. Why are these things overpowering him now? Why must he see and remember and ache and want? He had told himself he would explain to Hannibal today, that he would find a way to tell him.

He just needs to get out of the house, that's all.

Just get out of the house.

"I'll get meat," Will decides. "We're - I'm - okay for condiments. I'll pick up some peppers or salad or something."

"Bread would help." Matt notes, amused. "For sandwiches."

“Clothes would help,” Will counters, forcing the corners of his mouth down from the wry smile that tugs at them. “For hanging out.”

Matt’s grin widens. “Already hanging out,” he laughs, motioning gratuitously to the towel.

“*You’re the one acting like a fucking kid*,” Will responds, before a sound is pushed from him that he will deny forever, when he is literally - and bodily - tossed to the bed and bounces once before he is pinned to it and kissed again. “Should spank you.”

He gets nothing more than a pleased growl and strong hands pinning his own when he tries to struggle free. It’s an old game, one that started almost as soon as they had this, Matt entirely too pleased that he could hold and carry and manhandle Will so easily when the other so beautifully struggled against it.

“Think so?” challenges Matt, grinning against Will’s throat as he plants kisses along it, feels Will squirm beneath his mouth down further to his chest, a nipple, still holding Will’s wrists in his hands as he stops just at Will’s belly. “Try it, kid. If you can get one fuckin’ swat in, I’ll let you fuck me instead.”

Will huffs, upward, to clear his hair from his eyes so that he can narrow them properly at Matt. He seems to settle, to let out the breath held deep in his belly, and no sooner does Matt begin his downward descent then Will digs his nails into Matt’s hands, laughing as Matt hisses and jerks them free.

“Cheap,” Matt sighs, a laugh that sounds nearly like a warning, sitting back on his knees with his hands up and ready. “You gonna make a move?”

“You gonna stop me if I do?” Will grins, all adrenaline and coiled energy. It’s been a long fucking day. He strikes out quickly, different directions, eyes on Matt, but the other catches him effortlessly, furrows his brows in an expression of pity that has Will bucking beneath him, twisting his hands free to try again.

It ends in cursing and laughter, Will flushed against the bed and Matt returning to the deep kisses against his neck that he had been so happy to press to him earlier. Will pants, heart

pounding and eyes hooded, as he falls pliant and allows the treatment, curling his toes over the edge of the bed until Matt nuzzles against his waistband.

Then he works his hand free, a quick jerking motion, and manages a soft slap against the back of Matt's head, both of them shocked for a moment that he had done it before Will laughs.

"Fuck."

Matt just watches him, enough that Will finds his wriggling growing more urgent, just as laughter bubbles up harder against his throat.

"Shit, shit, shit, I fucking did it." He's pinned in his struggle and laughs louder. "I fucking did it!"

"That's not how you spank someo-"

"You said swat," Will exclaims. "You didn't say spank."

"You know what I meant -"

"But it's not what you said," insists Will again, pressing his hand over his mouth as if to stifle another burst of laughter that pours out anyway. "I get to fuck you, Matt, you said -"

"I lied," shrugs Matt, and before Will can protest Matt presses his hand over Will's mouth as his own was moments before and kisses the back of it, Will's lips beneath, before sitting back to snatch Will by the hips and turn him over. Laying heavy atop him, Matt rubs himself roughly against Will's ass, reaching down just long enough to unbutton his jeans and shuck them off - no underwear, again, common enough that Will wonders if the man even owns any. Matthew works himself downward again, kissing open-mouthed against Will's shoulder. "And I'm still going to spank you. And I'm still going to fuck you."

"You're such an asshole," grins Will over his shoulder, hair in his eyes again and arms tucked beneath him, watching the motion of Matt rutting in firm shoves against him.

"Am not," huffs Matt, settling his towel higher around himself. It does little good when he ducks to scoop up Buster as the dog wiggles up to him, stubby tail slinging his body back and forth, and cradles the pup as if he were a baby. "But I wouldn't want to scandalize the dogs."

"Nothing they haven't seen before," Will answers. The words no sooner leave his lips than he bites the bottom one to keep back any further remarks, but it's enough that Matt knows - immediately, like a shark scenting blood in the water - where Will's mind has wandered.

"Lots of times," Matt agrees, matter-of-fact. "Like, a fucking lot of times. And a lot -"

"- of times fucking," sighs Will, a flourish of color burning hot across his cheeks as Matt releases Buster again and Will edges past him. Close, too close, a brush together when he squeezes between Matt and the counter towards the living room. "I've gotta go before the day gets away from me -"

"*Take your pants off*," Matt mutters in response, stroking a hand down Will's side.

Will groans, arches up a bit higher to work his hand beneath himself and over the button and fly. He laughs again when he slips his jeans down his thighs and is yanked up, bent, for his trouble.

"Not gonna do it over your knee?" he teases, finds his answer is a sharp slap and hot lips against the back of his neck.

"Next time."

Will curses again, trembling with the knowledge that this was happening, and delighting in it being the most ridiculous thing to happen, ever, between them. Trumping even the time Matt had pinned him to the gurney in the ambulance and told him if he squirmed too much they would need the ambulance literally.

He rocks back against the heat of Matt behind him, parts his lips against the messy sheets and grins.

"Go on then. Civilize me."

Matthew's muscles aren't just for show, and the first clap of his hand against the curve of Will's ass is enough to steal the smaller man's breath from him, gasping. The impact is startling, but Will shifts as the sting sings longer through his skin, fingers clenching the untidy sheets.

"Holy -" Will doesn't manage to get the next word out before it's replaced by a yelp, and another, as Matt brings down the flat of his hand against the sensitive skin where his ass curves towards his thigh.

"All fuckin' day," Matt sighs, rubbing the reddened skin as Will moans in relief and pain and *want*. "All day I had to look at you, standing around in those fuckin' *pants*."

"My uniform?" Will asks, laughing startled as Matt spanks him again, harder for his trouble.

"I'd tell you to get one that fits right but then what would I look at all day?" Matt kisses the small of Will's back, curling his fingernails against the scarlet marks his hand has left. "All goddamn day I thought about this ass and the things I'm gonna do it."

"Fuck," Will groans, stretching and bending like a cat in the sun, one hand out to grasp the sheets above his head, the other still bent beneath him. "Then do something to it."

It's enough to draw a sharper grip from the fingers pressed to him, nails just biting the skin before Matt pulls back and Will finds himself shoved forward with the force of the next strike. It hurts. It hurts a *lot*, but Will finds that his breathing hitches and his skin flushes and his entire body tenses in anything but displeasure. The hand before him curls harder, knuckles white, the other down between his legs to stroke himself as he feels the weight on the bed shift, hears Matt rummage in the drawer for the lube.

The slick is cold against the sensitive skin and Will moans with it, laughing and biting the sheets as it not only finds its way where it needs to go but also across the reddened skin in a messy handprint. He spreads his thighs as he can, with his jeans still on, happily wriggles from them when Matt yanks them off and to the floor, then he spreads wider.

“Fuck me,” he moans. “Just go fucking deep, so fucking deep -” A hiss as two fingers push in, slick and cool and exactly what Will needs. He pushes back, clenches his muscles. “And keep going, keep - *fuck* -” The slap seems to almost resonate, harsh and sharper against the slick skin of his ass as Matt delights in the reaction it draws.

“God, you’re hot,” laughs Matt. Kissing, biting Will’s skin wherever he can, he digs his fingers deeper, shoving them hard against Will’s ass to work him open where he bears down, perfectly hot and wonderfully tight. “Who taught you to talk like that?”

“You.”

Another spank rings through the room and Will’s pitch rises high and sharp, a beautiful yelp that strikes whatever chord Matt imagined he wanted to hear. He strokes himself slick, wet lines trailing down his thighs, and for a moment he just takes in the sight of Will’s ass as he strokes - fingers spreading against the tense muscle, shining with lube, crimson from the impact his hand has left against it.

“Completely uncivilized,” Matt decides with a grin, removing his fingers and pressing his cock inside instead. The lube helps, always an excess of it, but Will is filled deep and fast and the sudden stretch forces a breathless choking sound from his throat, fingers snapping tight in the sheets again.

“Oh, god -”

“Jesus,” echoes Matt, curling his body over Will’s as he sinks himself as deeply as he can before jerking his hips against the smaller man’s ass to feel him shudder and clench. “I’ll do something to it,” he grins, tilting his nose and cheek against Will’s shoulder to lay heavy around him. “You’re gonna need a lot more time off by the time I’m fuckin’ done, unless you wanna explain your limp to Jack.”

“Words, all fucking words - *fuck* fuck! Matt - Jesus…”

It’s brutal, as it usually is with them, thrusts deep enough to send Will’s entire body shaking, back arching and fingers tugging tight against the sheets until he almost pulls them free from the mattress. And all the while, Will’s mouth runs. Voice higher, desperate, but always filthy, cursing and begging and demanding more, until another sharp spank draws a keen from him that ends in something close to a sob, and Will’s hand around himself tightens.

“Won’t be able to sit for a week, Matt, fuck,” he laughs, bites his lip, whimpers when Matthew pushes in deep and, for a moment, holds, pressed against Will, mouth open against his shoulder to leave a mark there, a bruise, a ring of teeth marks that Will will remember, rub his fingers over in the shower until they fade. Until Matthew makes them again.

“You love it,” Matt chides him, drawing his lips away from the dashes of darkness left where his teeth pressed. A lingering kiss is held there, as though an artist’s signature to his work, before Matt bucks his hips hard enough to shove Will into the mattress again.

“You do, don’t you? You love blushing when you sit at your desk and trying not to wince when you stand up again. Big important cop like you taking it so good for me,” Matt purrs, hunched over Will and driving a relentless pace inside of him. “If only they knew how fuckin’ dirty you are, how high your voice goes.”

Matt pushes Will down against the bed, hands against his shoulders to keep his head down and his ass raised, and Will tries even still to turn his hips up, to take more, deeper, *harder*. Both are close now, a frantic joining of strangled words and clutching hands, and Matt asks, his own voice pitching a little higher, “Tell me you want it, Will. Tell me. Say it.”

“Matt,” Will snaps, softly, when the taller man corrals him playfully, hands on either side of him on the counter. From bad to much fucking worse, in an instant, desire aching through Will despite himself - despite the thoughts of Hannibal foremost in his mind - in an instant of temptation.

Boyfriend, Hannibal had said. *Partner*.

And Matt in front of him, undoubtedly ready and more than willing. It wouldn’t mean anything, Will knows, it never did - friends at most, relieving the stress of their jobs in the way that made the most sense to two twenty-three year-olds who didn’t need or want anything more than that.

He bites his lip to stop the sound that rises, high and soft, a whine akin to one of the dogs when dinner is being made and not yet offered to them.

“Tell me you don’t want to do this,” Matt says softly, “and I’ll fuck off. But tell me, Will. Say it.”

"*Please, Matt*," Will whines, a long, drawn-out sound that would be pain if he wasn’t so close to orgasm his body was throbbing with the need for it.

“Fuck, I want it,” he whimpers, parting his lips against the sheets, snarling his teeth as Matt shoves in deep again, holds Will still as he pushes shallow thrusts against him. “I want to feel you for fucking days… when I walk, when I sit, when I fucking lie down -”

A curse, a groan, another slap enough just to startle, not to hurt, as Matt digs his fingers into Will’s thigh again and Will jerks his hand hard against himself, so, so close now.

“I want to know I’m fucking *owned* - I want to remember... “ he mewls, a desperate, sweet little sound and shivers. “Matt… make me cum, make me cum so hard I’m soaked with it - fuck.”

A rain of curses, half-formed until finally they melt into a rough groan against Will’s back as Matt buries himself and shudders to climax, pushed over by Will’s words, his needy pleas, cracking across the sweet tilt of his voice. Without yet stopping the thrusts that spill him

again and again inside the smaller man, Matt reaches around to snatch Will's hand away from himself and grip him instead, moaning against Will's shoulder as he strokes him, fingers still slippery.

It isn't more than a few quick jerks of his wrist for Will to collapse forward onto the bed again, arms weakened from the tremors that work him into a weak and wavering laugh, and pulse hot against Matt's hand.

With a grin, Matt wipes his hand along Will's length, smearing his release into his hand. Head ducked but eyes lifted, he holds his fingers out to the smaller man and - rocking slowly inside him still - Matt grins. "Lick it."

Will groans, turning his head just enough to see Matt, to take in his grin, his own utterly fucked-out expression, before he directs his eyes down to the fingers so close to his lips and shifts close enough to take them softly into his mouth.

Eyes up, blue and dark with pupil and need, Will grins and draws his teeth against the pads of Matt's fingers before pulling back. "Possessive much?"

There is something affectionate there, softer, despite the mischievous look and the way Will stretches his arms in front of himself and slowly presses flat to the bed until Matt is on top of him like a blanket.

"Gonna ache in places I didn't even know I had, fuck."

Matt kisses the side of his face, a warm and sloppy thing, smearing the remaining mess against the sheets before settling in over Will with a sigh.

"I'm just gonna live inside you," he decides, muttering contentedly. He is, in fact, still inside Will, as he often likes to remain for as long as possible. "Besides, you're the one that wants to be *owned*," he reminds Will, grinning when Will reaches back to try to swat at him again. "For fucking days -"

Will takes another swipe and can't connect, and Matt laughs, finally pulling himself out of Will with a shiver. He pats Will's reddened ass and leans closer to kiss his cheek, before rolling to lay beside him instead.

"Give me twenty minutes," Matt tells him, grinning drowsy, "and then you can have your victory fuck."

"I don't want it," Will murmurs, manages to keep his voice steady enough that he is almost proud of himself. Matt snorts, smiles that same small, sleepy, sensual thing that always had Will utterly distracted at crime scenes, at home, anywhere he could remember the thing, which was everywhere, and always.

"Will Graham, you are a fuckin' liar," he purrs, watching Will try to regain his composure, valiantly but unsuccessfully. "You are shaking with it, look at you." He licks his lips, leans in close enough to feel Will's trembling exhale against his lips, parted wanting. "You have

always been a shitty liar, can read you like an open book. And lyin"s so rude, Will, to anyone, to friends especially, to me."

Matt grins, victory already his, aware enough still to know when he's broken Will's denial barrier and found the fiery, snarling, wanton Will beneath.

"I should civilize you," Matt decides. "Worked so well, once, pliant as a kitten for me, after."

"Matt -"

"You loved it."

"- don't -"

Will manages another whine, plaintive and desperate, but his lips part for Matt's as they always have, his body, slowly shutting down resistance, like a machine on a slow reboot, whirring and aching and ready to be used, wanting to, just to feel it again. The rough hands, the wrestling and the struggle, the filthy words and hot breath and -

Will shoves against Matt's chest and slips from beneath him around the counter, hand against his lips, eyes wide.

"Fuck, Matt, *fuck!*"

Matt's eyes widen with surprise and he steps back, unnecessary but a step taken all the same, hands uplifted and palms out. "Okay," he responds, quickly smoothing the disappointment - the hurt, or something closely akin to it - from his expression.

"Okay what?" laughs Will, a wild, joyless sound. "Okay fucking *what*, Matt? I told you -"

"You did."

"I fucking told you -"

"I know, Will."

"And you -"

"You kissed me back," Matt interjects, though the look in his eyes as he does is one of immediate apology. He makes a move as though to step forward but the sharpness of Will's glare is enough to stop him dead.

"This isn't going to happen," Will seethes. "It was fun. It was a long time ago. And it's done. It was never anything more than what it was, I don't care what you've shaped it into now."

Matt, in a rare moment of regret, remains quiet.

"And if you can't get your shit together," Will finally adds, "you've gotta go."

There was a reason they spent so little time together, beyond fucking and the occasional flirtation - that lead to fucking - while lounging in front of the TV. Rare was the actual conversation, about anything, that didn't end like this, with Will flinging his hands into the air and Matt's voice raising in disagreement. Too much stress between them, both dragging themselves unwillingly through time and nearness into something like a relationship that neither was equipped to handle. Always the discord, arguments and sharp words, when they attempted to give themselves more than just a phonecall and a fuck and the length of a baseball game together.

"I can go now if you want," Matt finally says, and there's no rancor in his voice. A change there, at least, where once he'd have chuckled and fought and eventually dragged Will by the waist back into the bedroom as the smaller man relented, snorting laughter. "I mean it. I shouldn't have -"

"No," agrees Will, hand shaking as he rubs his eyes beneath his glasses. "You shouldn't have."

Though the dogs are all now at attention, the silence sits weighty until Matt, mustering up words Will isn't sure he's ever heard from him before, mutters, "I'm sorry, Will."

It takes a moment, long enough for Will's breath to begin to burn, a throbbing pulse against his lungs, before he sighs, nods, just once, to accept the apology.

"Look, just -" Will swallows, shakes his head, shrugs. Arms come up to wrap around himself to close himself off, to secure. "You need to find a place. You can crash till you do, but we are not living together. We are not what that was, whatever it was. I don't - I *can't* - do that anymore. I don't want to."

He swallows, mind edged with white noise in a telltale warning and Will holds his hand out to Winston for the dog to come, so he can reassure himself he's there, here, now, and Winston is with him.

"Will -"

"I'm gonna..." Will bites his lip. "Beer, shit for sandwiches, dog food. Right?"

"Shampoo."

"Shampoo. Right. Right. Got it. I'll get it, just -" Will gives him a look, something nervous and barely restrained, watches that sadness sweep through Matt that sometimes did, on certain nights, when he had lost someone on his table, when fucking between them became a proof of life, not a game.

"I'm sorry too," Will says, at length. "Please don't do it again."

"You got it," answers Matt, flippant words that are anything but with the weight in them. A moment of weakness, of the fragility that Will always suspected - knows - lays under the bravado. There and gone again, as he scoops up Buster and mutters to the dog about finding some clothes.

Will watches them go and holds back a sigh, Matt's pain as vivid for him as his own, a boy born into a facsimile of manhood, who knew he had to fight and push and resist just to survive. A boy for whom being scolded, chastened, and punished is more comfortable than being praised, but who feels the disapproval of the ones he cares about - rare though they are - like thorns beneath his skin.

"I can't fix you," Will murmurs, to himself, rather than Matt now well out of earshot, turning towards the porch with Winston at his heels. He takes his phone out, and curses before dialing, to see when Hannibal is free today.

Today. It has to happen today.

And it will.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal blinks, considers the words and their implication but says nothing, allows Will the time to get there himself. The dogs pull them along, tails in the air and waving happily as they trot along, slowed only by the humans that walk them. He brings his free hand down to stroke against the backs of Will's knuckles, catching his fingers, letting them go in a gentle reassurance.
>
> "God," Will sighs, skyward, to the increasingly barren trees overhead, even still unable to suppress a slight smile. "This would be so much easier if you got upset."

Hannibal requests one hour more to finish preparing something - he does not elaborate, smugly, over the line - before suggesting they take Winston for a walk in one of the parks nearby.

Will spends the hour in his car, tapping the wheel in erratic patterns before finally pulling from the curb to make his way to Hannibal's home. His insides burn with a guilt he cannot swallow away or soothe with the coffee he had stopped for on the way here. He can still feel Matt against his lips, the kiss so raw, rough, familiar, absolutely nothing like how Hannibal kisses him.

Will curses, loudly, and Winston whines from the back, pushing his paw up against Will's elbow as he drives.

"I fucked up, Winston," Will mumbles, turning his hand blindly back to rub the warm muzzle. "Now I have to own up."

He parks and waits, deep breaths before he pushes open the door and lets Winston out with him. He hears Maggie bark before the front door even opens, and Hannibal leans against the doorframe, sleeves pushed - not folded - past his elbows, drying his hands on a tea towel.

"I am so glad," he murmurs, head tilting, eyes narrowed in pleasure, "that you called me today."

Will doesn't hesitate, taking the steps two at a time to sink into Hannibal's arms, his own slung around the taller man's neck, pushing him back into the house beneath the force of his kiss.

Maggie's big body thuds against them on her way past, out the door, to leap wildly in play with Winston, and Will parts the kiss breathless only to look over his shoulder for a moment, shivering when Hannibal's hand presses against his back.

“I’m so glad you answered today,” Will responds, turning back to Hannibal to steal another kiss, to replace the feel of Matthew against them with a feeling entirely desired, by every part of him.

Hannibal grins, kissing him again, once more, before stroking his hair and clicking his fingers for Maggie to run back inside, Winston following at her heels.

"We may need to walk the two of them," Hannibal apologizes, as the two dogs tear down the corridor and through to the kitchen towards the smell of food. "Mischa has taken her leave, a film with a friend and a meal after. Several hours before she is due home but -" Hannibal raises a finger, amused, "chores before dinner."

“Are you sure we can’t have a little something first?” Will asks, his grin only vanishing when he steals another little kiss from Hannibal, and another, and another. It’s only after Hannibal hums in consideration that Will realizes how easy it is to forget, when they’re here like this. His own problems, the burdens of the world that he knows he wears around him like a shield, all wiped away beneath a fond touch and gentle hands.

Wonderfully easy. Too easy. And so Will slows himself, rather than waiting for Hannibal to do it, turning away from the kiss that Hannibal brushes across his temple instead to whistle, once, for Winston to return.

Never unprepared when it comes to the dogs, Will produces a leash from his coat pocket and latches it onto Winston’s collar, fingers curling behind the dog’s ears, eyes averted from Hannibal. “I’ve got something I want to talk to you about, anyway,” Will manages, drawing in a breath and holding it as he rights himself, leash wrapped loose around his wrist.

Hannibal smiles, reaches to the coat rack for Maggie’s leash and clips it onto her as well. He catches Will again, gently, to kiss his cheek before taking up a coat for himself.

"Shall we?"

The parks nearby are man-made, beautifully kept, and although dogs are allowed they are required to be leashed at all times. One has a lake, ducks floating on top, languidly making ripples in the water. Hannibal pulls a scarf, small, red, from his coat pocket and wraps it around his neck against the wind, turning to Will with his smile in his eyes as the dogs pull them forward.

Will is, of course, entirely aware that the tension that strikes discord down his spine is all his own. His own fault, and his own seemingly incessant need to catastrophize, when all Hannibal has responded with is tenderness and pleasure in his company. A self-flagellation, in lieu of punishment dealt by another, that pulls Will’s breath short as they walk.

“I should have told you before,” he begins, glancing sidelong at the man beside him who watches him, placid and content. Will wonders for a moment if Hannibal is just particularly skilled at suppressing his own worry, or truly doesn’t feel it at all.

Hannibal blinks, considers the words and their implication but says nothing, allows Will the time to get there himself. The dogs pull them along, tails in the air and waving happily as

they trot along, slowed only by the humans that walk them. He brings his free hand down to stroke against the backs of Will's knuckles, catching his fingers, letting them go in a gentle reassurance.

"God," Will sighs, skyward, to the increasingly barren trees overhead, even still unable to suppress a slight smile. "This would be so much easier if you got upset."

"Should I be?" ventures Hannibal, relieved when Will ardently shakes his head.

"No," he answers, "but I'd know better how to deal with that than you being so fucking sweet all the time." A fond admonishment, before he snares Hannibal by the hand and tugs him closer, pressing his back to a tree to stop for a moment, and regard the taller man. Working his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment, Will forces a sigh. "I've got someone staying with me for a while," he starts, before huffing out a rueful sound and watching the dogs instead. "Okay, no. I've got a friend staying with me for a while, who used to be," Will sighs the word, "*more* than a friend."

Hannibal takes the words in with a soft hum, leaning back against the tree to regard Will through narrowed eyes. A swallow, gentle, and he raises a hand to stroke Will's cheek.

"Is he still?" he asks. It is not an accusation, perhaps the beginning of a resignation. Soft, accepting, watching Will and waiting for him to make a choice, or offer one.

With abandon, Will tilts his cheek into Hannibal's hand, eyes closing and lips curving soft against his palm. He raises his own hand to keep it there, to keep Hannibal there.

"For now," Will responds, though he doesn't hide the vague displeasure that snaps his words a little tighter. "We - we were friends back in Louisiana. We worked the same scenes and would screw around sometimes," sighs Will. "He showed up here when he walked off the job, I guess. Says he's looking for a place, work, and I couldn't just kick him off the porch, you know?"

His words falter a little. He doesn't know if Hannibal knows. Doesn't know if he cares, if it even matters, but knows if he doesn't keep talking, he'll stop for good.

"He kissed me, this morning." Will shakes his head, jaw set as he lets Hannibal's hand slip from his cheek, eyes downcast towards where Winston lays against his feet.

Hannibal swallows, watches the way Will tenses, the way he admits the occurrence with a set jaw, the way his shoulders shift in preparation for anger, for rejection and for Hannibal to walk away, leave him.

He considers the soft tug against his heart, not a betrayal but a pain there, a worry that the kiss pulled Will back to Louisiana, back to the pleasure he had shared with his friend then, their relationship. He worries, as Will does, that there will be an end here, of something that has just so recently started.

"You kissed him back," he says softly after a moment, watches Will's lips press together in displeasure, at himself, at the situation and his treatment of it. Hannibal reaches for him

again. "Do you want to do it again?"

The question surprises Will, who looks up at Hannibal, blinks slowly - the allowance of it, the acceptance, no anger or grief in his words. And if he wasn't sure of his answer before, Will is now, and he shakes his head.

"I wasn't," Will laughs, a breath, "I wasn't entirely sure, at first, honestly? Honestly. It was - whatever it was - it went on a while and then suddenly he was back and -"

Will swallows, and leans in past Hannibal's hand to kiss his cheek, his jaw, an affection so sincere that it makes Will laugh, again, longer than before. "Christ," he sighs. "Not a second of it felt as right as you at that party, Hannibal. Calling me your - your boyfriend, your partner."

A sigh, shaky, and Hannibal's throat clicks gently as he swallows, allowing the intimate gesture, the kiss, wanting to be closer, to pull Will close and just hold them still together.

"I meant it," he replies, letting his smile grow wider, eyes soften, despite how hard his heart is pounding, how desperately he needs to know if this man will pull Will back to him, if Hannibal will lose Will to this.

"I want you, Will, as you are. As my own." He smiles, crooked and pleased. "As your own, with me." He draws a hand through Will's hair, brings him close to rub their noses softly together. "If you will have me."

They couldn't be more different. Matt who takes, and Hannibal who gives. Matt in all his lust and fury, and Hannibal, romantic and tender. There was a time when Will needed the former, couldn't manage more than that - when the prospect of a future supporting someone else was a terrifying thing, especially when that someone was so wholly irresponsible.

And Will's head swims with a sudden, dizzying pleasure to realize that maybe in spite of everything, he has managed to grow up a little bit after all.

"I will have you," Will answers with a grin, adding with a florid blush, "in as many ways as I can get you."

"Mm, in any that I let you." Hannibal raises an eyebrow, amused, before kissing Will's forehead, murmuring, "Thank you for telling me."

It is a relief, no genuine anger, but true, cool relief that he has not been lied to, has not been used and pulled along and deceived. Especially by the man he has so closely allowed into his heart, his life and family.

He pushes from the tree, takes the steps necessary to have Maggie pulling at her lead again. He threads his fingers with Will's and squeezes, leaning in close to ask, childish, conspirational, "What did he *do* with you?"

He delights in Will's blush, delights in the way he brings the hand with the leash to his eyes, trying to hide his grin.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Hannibal echoes, amused.

And just like that, Will’s shoulders relax into a slouch, days of anxiety erased with far less stress than he could have ever anticipated. Sighing, Will squeezes Hannibal’s fingers between his own, pressing their palms together, and watches the man with narrow amusement.

“I’m not sure I should tell you,” he teases. “It could ruin your image of me.”

“Nothing could,” responds Hannibal, and Will turns a sigh skyward again, but with pleasure, caught crinkling the corners of his eyes.

“You say that,” winces Will, but not without a grin, and an easy shrug that follows. “It was good, for what it was. Very good. Ah, adventurous.”

"Adventurous." Hannibal hums, amused, swinging their joined hands together as the dogs tangle the leads between them. "I did actually take you for the kinky sort."

Will snorts, Hannibal just smiles, warm, pleased with the way Will laughs, shakes his head in embarrassment and pleasure both. They walk in quiet for a while, hands clasped, walking close enough to brush shoulders.

"I don’t even want to suggest or assume," Hannibal says. "I am rather dull in that regard."

"Ropes," Will suggests, face neutral. Hannibal hums understanding. "Spanking." A slightly choked version of the sound previously made and Will bites his lip. "Within a moving ambulance."

"That is entirely unsanitary," Hannibal comments. Will nods.

"And unsafe."

"I do hope the poor man in the gurney enjoyed the show."

And this time it is Will who chokes, as Hannibal smugly tilts his head to regard his partner beside him. He recovers, as best he can, and the grin he turns up towards Hannibal is only lessened when he leans up to kiss Hannibal’s cheek.

“Choking, blindfolds, public places,” Will rattles off with a sigh, cheeks burning but not from the chill autumn breeze that blows against them. “Always spontaneous, never anything we planned or even really asked each other about. It was exciting, but,” he pauses, and chews his lip for a moment. “That’s all it was.”

The dogs pull ahead, happily stretching out their leashes and pressing close together as they bury their noses in the leaves along the path.

“Did you want for it to be more?” Hannibal asks, and Will narrows his eyes in thought, nose wrinkling.

“I don’t know, really. I didn’t know then either which I guess says a lot on its own. He was an EMT, so we’d bump into each other on cases, then that turned into texts - ‘pick up beer, I’m coming over’ - that sort of thing,” Will says. He hazards a glance to Hannibal, who listens attentively but shows little reaction beyond a soft smile when their eyes meet. “It was just fucking and Chinese delivery and cheap booze. It isn’t this. I never wanted it the way I want this.”

Will leans, resting his head against Hannibal’s shoulder as they walk, and allows his eyes to close for a moment, finding his way along the path by the feel of Hannibal beside him and the dogs in front.

“Even though I’d *gladly* try some of those things on you,” Will adds with a grin, looping his arm through Hannibal’s as they walk, now arm in arm. “You haven’t ever, before?”

Hannibal glances down, narrowed eyes at the man leaning against him, grinning up at him like a little kid, delighted.

"I cannot say any of the listed are on my repertoire,” he admits. In truth he had never had much experience to be able to play with things like that. Never long enough relationships, never enough trust or desire to try something beyond falling comfortably into bed. Most had spent so long trying to woo him, for his money and his name, never a care for his responsibilities or his personal preferences.

"What would you do to me, hmm?" he asks, kissing Will’s hair gently.

Will’s eyes narrow, suddenly devious, and he appraises Hannibal at length. “Short answer? Everything I possibly could,” he answers, laughing when Hannibal nudges him with an elbow. He glances down the little path behind them, ahead, ensuring they’re alone before he stops and slinks an arm around Hannibal’s neck, fingers curling into his hair to bring him near.

“Tie you down,” Will whispers, lips brushing warm against Hannibal’s ear. “Arms behind your back. Legs spread. Cover your eyes and leave you there, aching hard, with only my fingers brushing now and then against your skin, until you’re begging for it. I would fuck you all day, Hannibal, keep myself hard so I can have you there whenever I want. Your ass, your mouth. Use you when it pleases me, and not let you cum until I decide I want you to.”

Slowly Will lowers back to his heels, squeezing his grip a little tighter in Hannibal’s hair before he releases him, looking up at him wide-eyed, bottom lip held between his teeth.

“Something like that,” murmurs Will, a shy blush flooding scarlet through his cheeks as he grins.

A blink, slow, and Hannibal presses his teeth against the inside of his lip before leaning close to kiss Will, a gentle and deep thing.

"I suppose I'd better find a day free,” he murmurs, cheeks warm from the thought, eyes dark with it, a gentle nervousness beyond but more than willing to set it aside. He watches Will’s expression darken and soothe over again.

Maggie whines and pulls harder at her leash, Hannibal gripping it tighter to keep her in check, though his eyes remain on Will, all of his attention. Slowly, Hannibal smiles, turns back to the path as they walk, arms looped with Will, ducking his head to whisper against his ear, "We have several hours now."

Will makes a noise of agreement, smile widening as he turns his cheek to feel Hannibal's lips against it in an affectionate nuzzle. "No rope, though," Will muses, before shaking his head. Though it's difficult to fight down the desire to have Hannibal - and be had by him - as many times as possible before Mischa gets home, after the flood of memories from Matt, the pressure of that man's sexuality that rivals Will's own, it's a greater pleasure now to simply be close to Hannibal.

"Could we," Will asks, laughing to himself as he realizes the absurdity of not knowing how to phrase what he wants, "just lay together? Or - read or kiss or - just… cuddle?" His cheeks darken far more than when he was whispering illicit insistences into Hannibal's ear, and he pushes a hand self-consciously across his face to rub his eyes. "Christ."

Hannibal slips his arm from Will's and wraps it around his shoulders instead.

"I could think of no better afternoon," he admits, walking in stride with Will, pace quick enough to keep the dogs happy, comfortable for themselves. "Tea," he lists, "I made macarons. Blueberry, today. I think they'll have set by now. You'll help me with the cream."

They make a turn, following the lake to the place they started.

"Then, I suppose, we are already well-acquainted with the couch to be able to revisit it." Hannibal smiles, turning to murmur into Will's hair. "Hours still of just being close. Might nap." He groans softly, "Could certainly use a nap with you."

Will tucks close to him, beneath his arm and pressed against his side, as full of contentment at the thought of simple nearness as he is by the thought of more. Matthew would laugh at him, Will is pleased to think, to see Will *settle* in such a way, this dawning domesticity a far cry from the insatiable young detective he used to know. Macarons and tea instead of cheap booze and cheaper take-out. A quiet afternoon asleep rather than a rough fuck that has the neighbors banging the walls.

And Will couldn't be happier.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

> *"I fear you are about to tell me something I may not wish to hear," Hannibal ventures, eyes returning to Will's to find him biting his lip to stifle a wider grin. After a moment, he relents.*
>
> *"I had to take the shelter dogs while we're closed, I always do. I may have forgotten to mention that when you made the suggestion we all come for dinner."*

Two months later…

It had been Hannibal's idea, though he calls it an allowance only. Will knows better. What amuses Will most, in this entire situation, is that although Hannibal's intent had been to amuse Mischa, give her a genuine surprise on Christmas, he had not thought through the inevitable chaos that would come, or allow for surprises for himself, also inevitable.

The weather has been cold but not enough for snow, and it hangs over their heads as the last days of study and work trickle away to a well-earned break. Will pulls up outside the familiar house and cuts the engine, just watching for the moment through the glass before pulling his cellphone free to dial Hannibal.

"Will you be late?" Hannibal asks, no teasing in his voice, merely inquiry, but certainly a smile. Will feels himself grin.

"I'm here."

A pause before he sees the curtains open a little in the main room, Hannibal beyond just watching him, his smile widening as Will's own does.

"Shall I escort you inside?" Hannibal asks through the phone, gesturing for Will to come in as the other shakes his head.

"Come out a minute?"

Another moment of consideration before Hannibal sets the phone away, closes the curtains and makes his way to the front door. He closes it behind himself and carefully crosses the road to the van, borrowed from the shelter, to lean against the driver side window to greet Will with a smile.

"Hello."

"Hi."

Hannibal’s eyes narrow and he regards Will’s enthusiastic smile with amused caution. Lips press together, part, and Hannibal takes a breath before glancing to the back seat, where Will’s dogs sit tethered, tails wagging and tongues lolling.

"I fear you are about to tell me something I may not wish to hear," Hannibal ventures, eyes returning to Will’s to find him biting his lip to stifle a wider grin. After a moment, he relents.

"I had to take the shelter dogs while we're closed, I always do. I may have forgotten to mention that when you made the suggestion we all come for dinner."

"Deliberately?" Hannibal's tone holds a laugh despite the obvious wariness before he asks, carefully, "and how many guests will I be catering for with this unexpected addition?"

Will’s brows lift and he sucks in a considering breath, glancing across his shoulder to the wriggling warm mass of fur in the back. “An even dozen,” he says, quickly, as though Hannibal can’t hear it, as though Hannibal’s brow doesn’t arch even higher. “Baker’s dozen with Maggie.”

He turns back to Hannibal, who peers through to the back with arms folded across the rolled-down window. “If it’s too many,” Will begins, cheeks flushed. “I mean, it’s a lot of dogs and I should have mentioned it, probably, but I can just -”

“Will.”

“ - y’know, it’s not a big deal to just head back to the house, I can come back again later maybe with just Winston and - ”

“Will.”

“ - I don’t want to fuck up your Christmas Eve, and - ”

“*Will.*”

“*Hannibal*,” Will sighs, exasperated. His breath plumes into the air, dissipated when Hannibal leans through the window to quiet him with a kiss. Smile curving his lips, against which Hannibal’s move in slow, tender motions, Will lifts a gloved hand to rest against Hannibal’s cheek, pressing their foreheads together when their lips finally part. “You’re amazing,” murmurs Will, eyes closed but smile lingering. “I hope you know that.”

“So long as you and Mischa believe it, I’ve done well enough,” responds Hannibal, catching Will in another quick kiss before stepping back to allow Will to roll up the window and slip out of the car.

It’s a tussle, to stop the dogs from all spilling out of the back and untangle all their leashes, attaching them one by one - with quick dodges to stop the faster pups from barrelling out into the Baltimore cold - and handing them off in turn to Hannibal.

"She's upstairs," Hannibal says as more and more leads are handed him and he finds himself surrounded by excited whining and the beating of wagging tails, "so I suppose if I'm wrangling you had better go in first."

"Ask her to help you carry something? Usual trick?"

"They are usual for a reason," Hannibal smiles, and Will notes how well he manages to hold eleven dogs - Winston meanders around Will's feet unleashed - and still appear entirely poised. And most likely freezing, given he had left the house as is, in a collared shirt and vest, a tie knotted elaborately, suit pants and little else.

"Is that an Eldridge knot?" Will asks, stepping closer to see, and Hannibal's lips work not to smile.

"The fact that you know this makes me want to do beautifully inappropriate things to you in the street but I fear there is something between us," Hannibal tells him, tone amused and managing deadpan both at once. "Go," he murmurs, catching another kiss from Will before he jogs to the house and slips through the door, leaving it only slightly ajar behind himself as Hannibal carefully makes his way across the street with the excited pack of canines.

Will hesitates there a moment, unable to resist a grin as Hannibal approaches the house, somehow stately - elegant even - as he follows behind the herd of wagging tails and lolling tongues, a cloud of breath like a little steam engine trailing behind as the dogs tug their way onward. A particular word comes to mind as Will watches, one that tightens his chest and makes him feel as if he'll fall to pieces all at once, a beautifully full feeling that fans out hot from his heart and pulls a sigh from him.

He shakes the thought away, though the feeling doesn't fade, as he steps into the house and Winston wanders in alongside him. "Hey, Mischa!"

"Will!" comes the exclamation, as Mischa jumps down from her bed and races to the top of the stairs. "And Winston!"

"Hey," he laughs, "your brother's trying to bring in holiday stuff, could you give him a hand?"

She groans a little, but with a smile. "I'll get my shoes," she calls back over her shoulder. "He always gets too many groceries."

Will lifts a hand outside the door to Hannibal, to hold him just there at the bottom of the porch steps, and watches as Mischa - laces untied - skips down the stairs to go help.

"Let 'em loose," Will says, as Mischa reaches the bottom of the stairs, and Mischa barely makes it to the door before the entire swarm - Maggie from behind her, Winston joining in - push towards her, excited yaps and barks and happy wriggling. Mischa looks entirely bewildered for a moment before the scene even makes sense, and then she's on her knees in the middle of it all, greeting every dog and accepting licks and soft paws against her chest with a laugh.

Hannibal quietly closes the door and leans against it, wrapping his arms around Will when he steps back near enough, and just watches.

"There are so many!" Mischa laughs, leaning in to unclip all the leashes of the dogs she can reach so they don't tangle and get stuck, "Six, seven, eight..." she counts as the mass starts to disperse throughout the house, some curious up the stairs, others to the kitchen, more still just to the main room where Hannibal bites back the urge to demand they stay off the furniture. In truth - and it is the truth, watching Mischa pull a furry little bundle into her lap - it hardly matters.

"Merry Christmas," Hannibal tells her, a hand up when the inevitable question comes. “You cannot keep them, but they will stay a few nights."

"A few nights?" She sounds like she used to, at Christmas, Hannibal thinks, when she had been little and merely a book or a toy was enough to bring this out in her. "Whose idea was the surprise?" she asks, watching them both with wide, pleased eyes as she pulls the dog in her lap closer to nuzzle against, to the animal's doggish delight.

Will clears his throat and when Mischa glances to him, he points slyly towards Hannibal, who is distracted by one of the smallest dogs, who has jumped up against his leg. She grins at Will and, laughing as the dogs surround her, she pushes off the floor to stand and trips towards Hannibal, arms around his middle.

“A few nights,” she says again, grinning as she turns to look up at Hannibal. “This is the best Christmas,” she declares, and he runs a hand over her tousled curls. “And Will is staying too, right?”

Shrugging up a shoulder, Will shakes his head, nose wrinkling. “No, just dropping off the dogs,” he teases. “Figured I’d give myself the night off.”

She turns to hug him next, a pleased and warm thing before she makes a squeaking sound of delight and steps further into the corridor, slapping her knees for the dogs to crowd again, to follow her in a furry trail up the stairs. Hannibal snares an arm around Will’s middle and pulls him back against his chest.

"You better be staying,” he murmurs into warm hair, wrapping his other arm around Will too and sighing against him with a smile. "This is your pack, I'm just feeding it."

"And me?"

"No food for you, no."

Another kiss, just behind Will’s ear, and Hannibal lets him go to gather the leashes from the floor and hang them on the coat rack. He gestures with a tilt of his head for Will to follow him to the kitchen and stretches his arms over his head as he walks.

"I will need to find more bowls," Hannibal muses, and upon entering the space, Will understands why. The entire counter space is covered in bowls, some plastic, some metal, all filled with something that smells as good as their own Christmas dinner. Eight bowls, for the moment, for every dog accounted for.

Leaning over the counter, Will breathes in deeply, and exhales, laughing. “You made them turkey?”

“And liver,” Hannibal answers. “Mixed with quinoa, steamed carrots and broccoli, and poached eggs.”

“You poached eggs for the dogs,” repeats Will, brow arching. “I couldn’t poach an egg if my life depended on it.” He draws in another breath before relaxing back onto his heels from where he’d leaned over the counter, and circles to come near Hannibal again. “These dogs eat better than I do,” he laments, but his smile returns as soon as Hannibal loops an arm over his shoulder to pull him near.

“Not if I have any say in it.” A kiss is shared, sweet and slow, before Hannibal reminds him, “Bowls. For the additional guests. A fortunate thing, then, that I always prepare more than needed.”

Will grins and goes, pleased with the opportunity to rummage through Hannibal’s cabinets and boggle over the myriad sizes and shapes of dishes, mysterious tools and implements all in brushed steel. A few additional bowls are located, deep plates for the others, and Will is careful to leave the thinnest and most elegant dishware far away from his clumsy fingers. Dogs begin to trickle into the kitchen as they settle into the house, though most remain upstairs with Mischa, and Winston - an assurance to Will in his own doggish self-assuredness - curls up by the fire already ablaze in the livingroom.

It is a quiet preparation with Hannibal ladling out the food for Will to find space for in the kitchen. A few of the dogs sit at their feet, tails brushing the floor and waiting, some go to join Winston.

"I was going to set this on the back porch," Hannibal explains. “Give them the garden while we have a meal before Mischa can resume her transformation into one of them."

It earns a laugh, another press of lips to skin before they begin to set the bowls up outside, keeping curious noses locked in for the moment. When everything is set, Hannibal calls for Mischa to come to dinner. The vibration in the floor from countless dogs precedes her and Hannibal wonders how close this is to a potential reality for them all. So many dogs, why so many dogs?

"Wash your hands, please." Hannibal sets aside a towel upon which he had just dried his own. “If you help me set the table we can send those ravenous beasts outside quicker."

“So if I don’t help, then they get to stay inside?” grins Mischa, earning a sigh from her brother.

“If you don’t help, you will join them out there,” he responds, mildly, and she giggles as she scrubs her hands clean to help him lay out the silverware.

Will steps back, letting Hannibal and Mischa move in practiced ways about their space and assemble the table with a charmingly domestic elegance. He settles against the wall, here but not, a visitor in the life that they have made for themselves and built with such stability that

they almost seem to speak without speaking, aware of the other's movements as much as their own.

He envies it, a little, the seeming effortlessness of their co-existence, but quiets the longing that tugs at him with a reminder of what it must have taken for them - so young, both - to be where they are now. The details of their history still evade Will, but he knows that - while their closeness is enviable - their history must not be.

Instead, then, he glances over the dogs to ensure there's no trouble amongst them, and indeed, all seem very pleased by the excitement of new surroundings. All are well-trained enough not to make a mess on the floor or destroy any of the beautiful appointments with which the Lecters surround themselves. It's a relief, really, though Will gives himself a little smile in credit for such a well-behaved pack.

"Sit," Hannibal tells him, the backs of his fingers soft against Will's cheek as he brings the man back to him, back to himself. Blushing, caught in his thoughts, Will offers him a small smile and moves to sit across from Mischa, both watching as Hannibal goes to release the dogs to their still-steaming dinners in the garden.

They swarm, there, too, but all find that each has a bowl of their own and there is no fighting for the bigger share. Hannibal closes the door to keep the heat in, he will let the dogs in again once everyone has finished eating and once they have explored sufficiently enough to remain quiet and calm indoors. He supposes most will sleep by the fire, or on Mischa's bed, inevitably, when she directs the entire pack there.

For the moment, though, he turns back to their own dinner, taking up the bowl of garlic potatoes that had been steaming under a towel on the counter to set to the table and complete the meal. There is a lot of it and it is all homemade, and Hannibal watches as Will takes it all in with wide hungry eyes, and Mischa regards him with an amused sort of head tilt as if studying him in his new surroundings as well.

"Serve up," Hannibal says, smiling, and Mischa dives right in, a little of everything on her plate, passing the bowls and plates she had taken from straight to Will so he can do the same.

Will accepts each in turn, taking a bit of everything until his plate is covered in his attempt to try it all. Maple roasted root vegetables, juicy strips of turkey, fresh rolls shining with butter, and so much more that by the end of merely serving himself, Will can't help but laugh.

"It's so," he sighs, "traditional." Hannibal turns a curious look to him and Will shakes his head. "No, not in a bad way or anything, just -"

Now Mischa, too, shares her brother's look, but with far more obvious amusement. "Just?"

Blinking at her, Will presses his tongue between his lips and feels his cheeks warm under the good-natured scrutiny. "It's very different from how I normally spend Christmas. How I've ever spent it, really," he says, without saying more on it. "Thank you, both of you. For having me over. For all this work."

Mischa just bites into a roll, eyes narrowed in amusement, before ducking her head and looking at her brother. Hannibal just accepts Will's words, reminds him he is always welcome. Beneath the table he settles his feet gently against Will's as they eat.

Dinner passes quickly, with good conversation and laughter, Mischa asking about all the dogs, Will's own and the rescues, and gets a personality card on all. Which like to jump up, which snore, which sleep well with people and which prefer the floor. Hannibal listens, knows she is seeking for another animal for her own pack that Hannibal will inevitably relent to, and amuses himself by coming up with excuses for why she cannot have another.

By the time they've finished eating, Mischa's up to let the dogs back in, laughing when they shake off the first snow on the porch before trotting in to get to the fire, as predicted. Hannibal clears the plates and brings out dessert, this less traditional, with tall glasses filled with berries and yoghurt, passionfruit sauce on top, heavy chocolate truffles, a hot apple pie.

Will looks almost longingly at it, as though he could not fit any more in but will make a valiant attempt.

"There is no rush," Hannibal assures him, as Mischa takes her glass to go sit with the dogs, and Hannibal stands to make coffee in the kitchen.

The thought comes as unexpected as the one before, when Will had watched Hannibal stoically herding dogs towards the house, as now he watches the beautiful curves of his shoulders as they move beneath his shirt, careful fingers finding their way over the smooth contours of the coffee maker. Will can't stop watching him, in fact, and feels his cheeks warm as that unfamiliar thought settles into him, winds itself lovely and aching through his chest.

He could live like this.

To have someone - two someones - to come home to at night, to share holidays and traditions, to be something like a family, more than the furry one Will has taken into his life already.

His throat is a little tight as he swallows, and finally turns to gather up his parfait and take it towards Hannibal. Leaning against the counter near the fussy machine that Hannibal coaxes to life, Will spoons out a scoop of the sweet cream and berries, and offers it out to him with a soft smile.

Hannibal leans, enough to take it between his lips and pulls back with a smile to chew. Beneath his hands, the coffee maker comes to life and with a sound of triumph, he sets two mugs beneath the filter, before turning to Will, watching him taste the parfait as well, eyes narrowing at the flavor.

"The dogs are staying several days, I was hoping you would as well," Hannibal tells him. It's a gentle invitation, no pressure either way and he can see, with relief, that Will no longer takes these requests as tests but as they are. He supposes the house will be taken care of in Will's absence anyway, perhaps the solitude welcome.

"Mischa has been invited to spend Christmas day with a friend, though how reluctant she will be to leave the dogs, now, I am unsure. Nonetheless the day is our own, tomorrow, if we wish

it for nothing more than a sleep in and a day covered in fur."

He accepts another spoonful from Will and the kiss that follows, chaste and sweet, and chews with a smile as the coffee machine growls beside them.

"Honestly?" Will murmurs, past a spoonful of berries. "There's nothing I want more." His eyes crinkle in pleasure, tilting his head just a little as Hannibal kisses his cheek.

They share the dessert between them and store the other for later, cups of coffee each as they make their way out to join Mischa. She and Will speak at length, mostly about the dogs, but not only - about her classes at school and outside of it, and her newest interest in ice skating. There is, to Will's surprise, little emphasis on gifts - though a few are there for Mischa, including a pair of skates that she immediately begins lacing up - rather than on the time spent together, all warmly lit by fairy lights and fire, good food and better company. Late into the night, they talk, and laugh, until Mischa - still in her skates - begins to drift off against one of the bigger dogs, and Hannibal takes his arm from over Will's shoulder to scoop her from the floor instead.

"A moment," he tells Will, offering a soft smile as Mischa stirs and leans over Hannibal's shoulders.

"Come!" she murmurs, sleepy and delighted as many of the dogs stand to trot after her and her brother.

Will watches them go, and whispers a ten-count before scurrying from the couch to his coat, hung beside the door. He plucks a gift out of it, padding quickly on socked feet back to the couch and spreading himself across it, the little box tucked beside him under a cushion.

Hannibal returns presently, one of the dogs that had followed them upstairs, trailing him back down them again. The fire now warms four bodies, not including their own, and three are from Will's little pack. He moves to set one knee against the couch, leans to brush his lips with Will's before deepening the kiss with a soft sigh.

"I am very glad you're here," he tells him, honestly, nuzzling his nose against Will's before kissing him again, shifting to lie flat on top of the man, arms around his middle and head against his stomach in a comfortable sprawl. It's domestic and warm, entirely natural to want to press this close to Will and feel his hands splay comfortably in his hair.

"Mischa may have the dogs to her heart's content but I have you," he sighs, turning to rest his chin against his hand to smile at Will, "selfishly all to myself."

Gentle fingers curl through Hannibal's hair, stroking it back from his face again and again, watching with a faint smile as it slips back into his eyes each time. Will tucks his other arm beneath his head, propping himself up to watch down at Hannibal, heavy against him, warm and comforting.

"You do," Will tells him, with a breath of laughter. "I wish I could tell you how much it means," he murmurs, biting his bottom lip as he searches for the words. "To have somewhere to go. To have someone to go to." Stretching, pleased to feel Hannibal against him, Will

watches the soft, straight strands sift through his fingers. “Holidays weren’t much of a thing for me, growing up. My dad worked a lot - we’d have dinner, a little tree sometimes, a few gifts. He tried, I know that, but it was never like it looked in the movies, you know?”

A pause, and he sighs long. “I never really did anything for it after I moved out. Last year was with Bev, at least, but before that,” Will trails off, a small shrug. “Nothing, really.”

“I do it for Mischa,” Hannibal admits, settling again, pushing his toes against the foot of the couch to move further up Will’s body to rest against his chest now, with a sigh. “When we were younger, it was always festive… for a few years it was tough, settling and working and time but… I always made that time for her, Christmas was always like this for her, and I wanted her to have that.”

He hums, smiles, lets his eyes close as Will’s fingers scratch lightly against his scalp as he cards through his hair. “Now I’m used to it, I enjoy the process. I like the food, I love watching Mischa open her presents, though most of the time she knows what she’s getting.”

Hannibal rolls his shoulders in a languid stretch and lifts his face to Will’s again. “This is the first time in a long time it’s felt like a family thing, more than just the two of us, more than just occasional friends over for the dinner. Thank you.”

Hannibal sets his hands against the couch and leans to kiss Will softly, just once.

For Will, though, just once is never enough, and he drapes his arms across Hannibal’s shoulders to keep him near, and let their mouths meet again and again. The house is quiet, but for the sound of the fire and their gentle kisses, the soft noises their lips and tongues make as they meet and part, join and draw away. And though the gentleness of it is enough to send a warm shiver across Will’s skin, it is Hannibal’s words that coil snug and tight inside of him.

A family, the three of them and all the dogs, an easy arrangement filled with warm words and laughter. Less and less he feels like a guest, but still - even though he will spend days here - the thought that he’ll have to leave dwells in the back of Will’s thoughts. The worry that, despite Hannibal’s insistence, Will could become one more added concern for him, rather than a welcomed passer-by in the life that they have built and managed beautifully without him.

“Thank you for having me,” Will finally murmurs with a soft smile, as they part enough to breathe, and for a moment their eyes meet. The questions perched on Will’s parted lips draw up a tension in the corners of his mouth, a breath taken and held as if to ask - maybe to just confirm - but instead he brings up a broad smile and bites his lip, twisting beneath Hannibal to dig out the gift he buried between the cushions, ribbon now squashed flat. “I got you something.”

Hannibal’s eyes slip to the little gift and his lips work briefly. He had gotten something for Will as well, carefully wrapped and upstairs in the bedroom, now he wishes he had brought it down with him, with the other gifts. He moves to sit, shifting to have his feet in Will’s lap as Will’s are in his, facing each other from the opposite ends of the couch. He is careful in unwrapping, something that always frustrates Mischa in that adorable childish way, but seems to merely have Will holding his breath in anticipation for a response.

Within, is a black sleek box, and Hannibal knows immediately what it is, know what it would have taken to save for it, to set the money aside and get this. Hannibal is quiet for a very long time, eyes on the gift, fingers tracing against it, before Will speaks, the same nervous energy that sends his words quick and higher.

“I thought… with class. Could be easier since you handwrite your notes, then you won’t have to… transcribing won’t take up that much time anymore, if you just have it there already. There’s a notebook, in there already, at the back, but there are others if you want, I can just -”

Hannibal slides his feet to the floor, leans in and kisses Will into silence, hand up against his cheek, stroking his thumb gently just beneath his eye. “You’re perfect,” he tells him, words warm and soft against Will’s face, smile just the same as he kisses him again, sets the gift between them and holds Will with both hands against him now. “Thank you.”

Laughing, just a soft sigh of sound, Will lets himself be moved, brought closer until he’s laying nearly atop Hannibal as Hannibal was on him before. He spreads a hand across Hannibal’s chest, curls his fingers against the heat of the man tangible beneath the soft cotton of his shirt, and lets Hannibal’s words echo in him, resounding warmth as they play again and again. Will knows how far he is from perfect, but to hear Hannibal say it, he can almost believe it, and revel in the fact that *Hannibal* believes it.

And if he doesn’t say it now, when will he, Will asks himself. A perfect day, surrounded by people who matter most to him, who have so gladly opened their home and their lives to him, beautifully lit by firelight and the glow of little lights strung across the tree, full of food and almost aching from the intensity of affection shared between them. There is no other time, Will decides suddenly, a wild flutter in his heart - it has to be now.

“I love you,” Will murmurs against Hannibal’s ear, the words soft and unevenly spoken, quickened breath and speeding pulse as he closes his mouth against Hannibal’s to give himself a moment more before he answers.

A hum, soft, and Hannibal pulls Will closer, arms wrapped around his shoulders, his middle, as he kisses him again, tastes the words, savors them, before pulling back with a smile, eyes closed and feeling Will’s quick breath against his lips.

“Thank god,” he sighs, laughing gently before opening his eyes, seeking his eyes up to meet Will’s. “I love you too.”

And it’s as easy as that, easy enough that his smile widens, his laugh sounds warm in his chest where Will’s hand splays to feel his heartbeat. Something known so long and so well and finally put into words. Hannibal feels like he could fly.

And Will, Will feels as if he’s just dropped, a joyful plummet of utter relief the likes of which he’s certain, absolutely, that he’s never felt before. A falling sensation, dizzying and wonderful, that finds him safely ensconced in Hannibal’s arms, and he shifts to sit atop him and frame the man’s face in his hands. Just to watch him, to see the color in his cheeks, the fondness in his eyes, and to kiss against the smile that has, since they met, made Will’s heart race against his ribs.

“Fuck,” Will laughs against Hannibal’s mouth, eloquent as ever. “I thought,” he begins, and shakes his head, thumbs stroking beneath Hannibal’s eyes as he leans low over him to kiss again. It doesn’t matter what he thought, what his worries were, his endless anxious concern over everything and anything, and an oppressive weight that had sunk inside of him so long ago seems that much lighter, suddenly and wonderfully.

“Dogs and all?” asks Will, grinning against Hannibal’s cheek where he brushes endless kisses, to feel the smile that forms beneath his lips.

Warm hands come up against Will’s back, rubbing slow lines up and down it, curling over his shoulders, slipping down to rest against the waistband of his pants, thumbs hooked over his belt.

“Dogs and all,” Hannibal confirms, amused. The four that are still here are all entirely blissed out by the fire, one on her back, leg twitching in sleepy pleasure, the others curled in little balls that match breathing. Hannibal could think of no better evening, than what they have just shared.

“Your present is upstairs,” he says suddenly, tilting his head for the door and sighing, contented, before turning back, “but I am not wont to get up right now, for a while.”

It seems Will hardly cares, just as happy to be straddling Hannibal here, in the quiet and warmth surrounding them on Christmas eve. He has no idea what time it is, it could be Christmas already for all either know, or care. Hannibal closes his eyes on a contented breath and allows his smile to widen.

“Dogs and cold feet and snoring and all,” he says gently, opening one eye just enough to watch Will’s response.

“I don’t snore,” Will protests, and Hannibal can’t help but laugh.

“No,” he murmurs, “of course not.”

Will’s smile widens, cheeks darkening. “But if I did - which I definitely don’t - it would be rather quiet and charming, right?”

Training his expression to one of utmost seriousness, Hannibal arches a brow. “Certainly,” he assures Will. “Not loud enough to awaken dogs and men alike from their slumber.”

With a snorting laugh, Will prods a finger into Hannibal’s stomach and drapes himself across him, laying heavy, head tucked against the crook of Hannibal’s neck. It was so easy, it has always been, Will realizes, but for times that he’s made it unnecessarily complicated. He takes a deep breath, and lets it settle out slow, tracing the lines on Hannibal’s shirt, following the paisley curves on his tie.

“I feel like,” Will manages, voice soft. “I feel like I’m home. Like this could be - home, I mean.” He parts his lips with his tongue and feels his breath catch before he adds, uncertain and so sure all at once. “It could be, maybe. If you - if we - “

Hannibal holds him, directs his eyes to the ceiling and considers, how easy it would be to wake up every morning to Will against him just like this, to coax him awake for work, to laugh when he resists. How easy it would be to have Will here when Hannibal works late or has evening labs, how easily he and Mischa get along, how much she likes him too.

He wants to say yes, and the hesitation that stops him is nothing to do with Will, nothing to do with his own want of just such a thing. It's the idea that Will would have to give up the space of Wolf Trap to live in Baltimore proper, he would have to give up the river and the forest, the acres of silence. That Hannibal would have to, likewise, give up this home, find somewhere for all the furniture and books, perhaps put most into storage…

It seems so impossible logistically and yet all Hannibal wants to do is say yes, agree, and think of the planning later.

"I want nothing more than to wake up to you every morning," Hannibal tells him honestly.

It's an answer and it isn't, a desire without confirmation, but without rancor, without dismay at the idea as Will - despite everything - had dreaded. He studies Hannibal from so near for a moment more, fingertips skimming down the bridge of his nose to press against his lips, and tries to quiet the voice inside that tells him he's pushed too far, that so soon after such relief in the words they finally spoke, he grew overconfident. He quiets it by kissing Hannibal and finding the warmth returned to him, another murmur of affection - of love - shared between them both.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Bev hums, jerking her head back towards the office for Will to follow. "Spill it."

"I know nothing about him," Will says, leaning against the wall, his own cup warming his hands. Bev stares at him a moment before taking another deliberately slow sip of her drink.

"You got this from a Starbucks cup?"

It is always the smallest things that make you realize the grander picture, and Will wonders, as he waits in line at Starbucks, why such an epiphany would hit him now, when he debates a peppermint mocha over a toffee nut latte for Hannibal. He realizes he has no idea what the man would prefer, and it hits him harder, perhaps, than it should.

"You're not even meant to be at work today," Bev raises an eyebrow, shoving a pen behind her ear as Will sets two coffees to the counter and shoves one forward, looking somewhat downcast and entirely too confused.

"You never buy me seasonals," Bev muses, taking up the cup anyway and taking a sip. "You never buy yourself seasonals. You claim Starbucks can't make coffee."

"They can't," Will mumbles, and Bev furrows her brows.

"Don't tell me you broke up."

"No, we - I - no, we didn't break up."

"Oh thank fuck, I can drink this without guilt." The joke falls flat and Bev hums, jerking her head back towards the office for Will to follow. "Spill it."

"I know nothing about him," Will says, leaning against the wall, his own cup warming his hands. Bev stares at him a moment before taking another deliberately slow sip of her drink.

"You got this from a Starbucks cup?"

Will just glares, before his expression soothes and he sighs, nodding. "I don't even know what he likes. With seasonal fucking coffee. What he would enjoy for lunch. What things he does when he’s not working, hell, I know nothing that a significant other should know."

"Have you asked?" Bev blinks, raises her eyebrows expectantly when Will just gives her his patented drenched puppy expression. "You know, you learn this stuff, as a couple, that's how

it works. You ask, or observe and then you know."

“I want that,” Will reponds. “I want *that*, I want to be able to observe and to - to settle and -”

“And?”

“I asked,” he shrugs, running a hand up the back of his hair, and letting the curls sit wild when he drops his hand back to his side.

“Asked what?”

“If we should - you know. Settle.”

Bev’s eyes widen above the cup of coffee. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. I mean. Kind of.”

“Kind of.”

“I mentioned that I would,” Will explains. “Live with him. With them.”

“What did he say?”

Will sighs, and spins his chair beneath him to drop into it, heavy. “Nothing, really. I mean, he didn’t say *no* but…” Rubbing a finger against his eye, glasses unsettled, Will murmurs, “I don’t know how to ask.”

“About coffee?”

“About him. About Mischa. How all of this happened.”

Beverly makes a considering sound, sucking the taste of the overly sweet coffee from her bottom lip. “I know.”

“Don’t tell me,” Will insists immediately, and Beverly arches a brow. “Don’t tell me, I want to hear it from him.”

“So ask,” she reiterates. “Ask him to tell you.”

Huffing a dire laugh, Will slouches back in his chair, head tilted back to study the tiles in the ceiling. “That’s - that’s a hell of a conversation.”

“Start with coffee,” suggests Bev, a slight smile curving her lips. Reassuring in the way that only she can be, no platitudes or false consolations, but just a genuine encouragement without denying the weight of Will’s concern.

Still, Will snorts. He counts the tiles as a distraction for a moment more, and feels his chest tighten at the thought of it. “I know he takes milk, and raw sugar in it.”

“Then you’re off to a good start,” she shrugs. “Probably avoid the fake eggnog latte, though.”

He laughs a little, a weak sound but genuine, and considers the truth of it. It isn't about the day-to-day, that would come with time - with nearness and consistency - but the idea, so easily spoken at the time, of insinuating himself into Hannibal's already busy life is not only an outreach from his own stability, but a further burden on the man himself. To live with two people, each with their own anxieties and conditions prone to sudden appearance without warning, is asking a great deal more than a simple rearrangement of closet space and bookshelves, and Will doesn't blame Hannibal for his hesitation, however gentle. Heart fluttering, Will takes his phone from his pocket, and sends a simple text.

Coffee?

Another return to Starbucks, this time two coffees in the holders and a hot chocolate held very carefully in one hand as Will drives, pleased to find a space on the street outside the Lecter house. Winston whines from the back seat, excited to see Maggie again, used to this house now, and what coming here means. Will procrastinates a moment more, tapping his fingers against the wheel before killing the engine and taking up the paper holder he'd been given so he could wrangle the coffees with him as Winston waits, tail wagging, by the car door.

It's the usual motions, Will thinks, knock, wait, kiss Hannibal, step in, kiss Hannibal some more, eventually make it to the kitchen or the couch and finally settle. Will finds himself smiling at the idea that it could become routine. Could. Should. He shakes his head and knocks, and it's Mischa who opens the door.

"You brought coffee," she says, eyes wide and eyeing it with entirely too much interest.

"I brought Hannibal coffee," Will corrects, smiling at the narrowed eyes and the tilt of the head.

"You have three."

"I have three cups. Two coffees."

"Cryptic."

"You know how I roll."

A moment of consideration before Will holds out the white hot chocolate to her, and she accepts it as toll enough to let him into the house with a grin, bending to scratch Winston behind the ears as he comes in after Will, tail wagging.

"Hannibal's in the study," she says. "Not sure what he's doing in there, classes haven't started for him yet."

It's an innocuous statement, surely, but Will could double-over and sprawl himself across the floor with a groan at the words. He tries to imagine - he's very good at it, imagining - and

can't fathom what Hannibal would be doing, and instead just accepts with absolute and irrational certainty that it is a Bad Sign.

"How is he?" Will ventures, letting Mischa hold the tray of drinks when she offers so that he can unlace his boots.

She shrugs, regarding Will with more interest than in consideration for the question itself. "Fine?"

Not helpful. Will wonders how long it will take the coffee to go cold when he just lays down alongside it on the floor and waits for Hannibal to come and tell him why this is all a terrible idea. He blinks at the cold nose that pushes against his hand, and gently grasps Winston's muzzle for an affectionate little shake before pushing his shoes aside and taking the coffee back.

"Should I just -" Mischa arches a brow, and Will tries again. "Should I just go back?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Don't want to interrupt -"

She rolls her eyes and grins before slurping her hot chocolate. "I dare you to try."

"Interrupting?"

"Not possible," she assures him, childish confidence in the toss of her hair as she turns to escort Winston off into the living room, leaving Will to his own devices.

The house is quiet, but Will can hear music softly from the study as he approaches it and knocks. "Hannibal?"

A sound like the chair being pushed back against carpet and Hannibal is at the door before Will can think better of staying, smiling at him with narrowed eyes and a curious tilt of his head.

"You brought coffee," he comments, so like his sister that Will blinks, wondering if he should just replay the entire conversation from the front door and never go near the reason he came here at all.

"I brought you coffee."

"Well, you did suggest it," Hannibal says, reaching for one - the one that Will had chosen for him, Will thinks as his heart hammers against his ribs - and leaning closer in the process. "It is only fair."

A quick kiss to Will's cheek and Hannibal turns back to the study, pushing the door open wider to invite Will in. The space is warm, despite there being no fire, and light, despite the gray of the sky outside. It's strange, and welcoming, and entirely Hannibal's own. Will sips his own coffee and licks his lip before walking slowly after Hannibal.

“I almost feel like full disclosure is in order,” Hannibal says, moving to stand behind his desk again, setting the coffee down as he shuffles some papers together, a notebook that Will notices is the one he had gifted Hannibal for Christmas, with the pen to upload to his devices. Will can barely breathe for the words, though, and doesn’t raise his eyes as Hannibal continues. “I somewhat miss the number of dogs that this house had to house during the festivities.”

Nearly choking on his coffee, Will can’t help but laugh, brows disappearing beneath the curls of hair hanging into his eyes. “All thirteen of them?”

Feigning a grudging grumble, Hannibal hums.

“Masochist,” Will accuses him, mildly. “It’s a Christmas fuckin’ miracle they didn’t break anything. Everything.”

“Or a credit to being particularly well-trained.”

“And a flatterer,” chides Will, affectionate despite the dread still sinking heavy in his belly. He doesn’t follow near enough to see what Hannibal was working on, though the curiosity drives him nearly to distraction, and instead Will settles into one of the arm chairs near the bookshelves, curling his feet up beside him. “Full disclosure?” he offers, knowing in the dark eyes that lift towards him that he’s done nothing to hide the anxiety muddling his words down into a murmur.

“Of course.”

“I wanted to talk to you about - about not coffee,” Will admits.

“That covers a rather wide swath of conversation.”

“About what I said on Christmas.” Hannibal stops, now, papers in hand, and Will shakes his head. “No - not - not that. I meant that. I do,” he manages, “love you. I do, a lot. God, a lot.” He breathes a laugh, a dire sigh, and ducks his head to rest it against the wing of the chair. “About the other thing.”

“Will -”

“No, I - it was too much, maybe. Probably. I don’t - it’s asking a lot and -”

“It’s something else,” Hannibal tells him, and Will has to blink to realize the interruption is entirely accurate. He wonders if he’s grown transparent or if Hannibal has just become that good at reading him. More panic, cold, wondering if he is just lagging behind, if Hannibal knows everything a partner should and it’s just Will who’s -

“Whatever is bothering you, it’s not your request that we move in together.” Hannibal’s expression is soft, though the smile is just in his eyes, now, as he sets the papers away into a drawer of his desk and takes up his coffee to join Will on the armchairs, turning his own with his foot to face Will, so they are not sitting side by side.

“You’re studying for surgery, not psychology.”

“I’ve crossed paths with the latter,” Hannibal offers, resting his feet crossed at the ankles between Will’s that he lowers to rest at hip-width, one poised on his toe and jerking in nervous anticipation for something. Hannibal takes another drink of coffee and regards his partner for a moment longer. “Talk to me, Will.”

Will lowers his eyes to the drink held cradled in his hands, and mutters rueful, “I feel like I’m in therapy.” A hand lifts right away, and he shakes his head. “Not really - no. I didn’t mean that. I just,” he sighs, trailing off to chew his lower lip in thought. “It’s not the request, itself. The idea of it. But it’s everything else that comes along with it.”

“You,” Hannibal asks, and Will smiles, small and crooked.

“Baggage,” he answers. “More than what you’ve already got. Mismatched, even. Really uncoordinated. But I don’t know anything about yours. At all. You’re,” sighs Will, a gentle aching thing, his heart sore as it beats a little harder, for the Lecters’ private carnage that even still unknown to Will hurts him as much as if it were his own. “You’re twenty-five,” Will finishes. “How?”

Hannibal ducks his head to mirror, considers the words as he turns the paper cup in his hands, over and over before lifting it to take another sip.

“They offered me the choice to just go about my way,” Hannibal tells him, lifting his eyes and resting his head back against the wing of the chair. “I was nineteen, I had just gotten accepted into Johns Hopkins, and the inheritance was mine to use as I wanted - no other family had come to claim it, or us.” He shrugs, offers Will a smile when he sees blue eyes widen already.

“Mischa was six, then. She would have been a good age for foster. A lot of families seek children they don’t have to raise from babies, some want them past the difficult toddler age, and Mischa was… a terrible toddler,” Hannibal laughs, eyes narrowed, before he bites his lip and releases it. “They offered me a chance to sign her away, live my life. I think I made such a fuss they had to sedate me down. So they signed her over to me instead, as legal guardian.”

Only more surprising than someone taking on such responsibility at such a young age is that anyone would try to separate the two, and Will shakes his head in disbelief. “It seems unconscionable,” he murmurs, brows drawn. “I can’t imagine taking care of a six year-old… ever, really, let alone at that age, but - the idea of you two not together...”

He can see it, clear as if he were there - Hannibal’s snarling fury, the oaths he would have spat if they took her from him, how she would have called for him and cried, hitching breaths that shook her shoulders and left her breathless. How Hannibal would have changed, his beautiful mind snarled into savagery with no family there to ground him, the cruelty he would have inflicted on the world in vengeance for them, seeking Mischa out in every corner of the world, forever haunted by how she clung to him before they took her -

Will works a foot against Hannibal’s own, pressing their toes together to ground them both, away from what might have been to what was. There isn’t any other way to ask but to ask, and so he swallows hard and murmurs quiet, “What happened to them?”

“What I hate, is I can’t remember,” Hannibal responds, pressing back against Will for the warmth, the comfort of him. “It was nighttime, and it was a house-break, and that’s as much as I have fully, the rest comes in flashes of memory.” He shrugs, shaking his head. “Mischa remembers. And that’s what I hate most.”

They’re quiet for a moment, Hannibal takes another long drink of his coffee, genuinely enjoying it, amused that Will would have thought to bring him one, delighted that he had guessed at which kind to buy. Then he sets it aside, to the floor, and bends to take Will’s feet up to rest against the seat of his chair, moving his own to rest against Will’s the same way.

“I don’t know what happened to my mother, I couldn’t hear her when I woke. I could hear Mischa, so I went to her first. She was crying, confused and scared as a child would be in that situation, seeing monsters in the shadows when the real ones had passed by,” he sighs, rubbing a hand over his face before resting fingers against his lips, thoughtful. “I heard my father, then, calling for me, for my sister, and when I went to find him, the attacker found me first.”

Hannibal makes a soft sound with his tongue, a hollow click. “Whatever he hit me with knocked me out. Black. The rest is reports and hospital lights and Mischa.”

“Both of them,” Will confirms, and Hannibal nods. It pulls a sigh, nearly a shudder from Will, a bone-deep ache in his shoulder that he just stops himself from reaching for. Instead, he settles his feet deeper alongside Hannibal, and puts his coffee aside to lift Hannibal’s feet into his lap. Something to do with his hands, something to bring sensation back into his fingers when the spark of phantom pain has made them numb. When he awoke, he was wounded but alive. Winston was alive, who as if summoned, wanders into the room now, fluffy tail sweeping in a slow wag as he finds Will and settles nearby.

Will was self-sufficient at that age, but hardly any great success, too distracted by the people around him to focus on himself more than minimally. Loss and shock taste like tinfoil against his tongue as he watches Hannibal, and imagines him younger, waking in confusion only to be told that both parents are gone, that his entire world has suddenly and irreversibly changed.

“Was she hurt?” asks Will, voice hardly above a whisper, and thumbs pressing deep into the bottom of Hannibal’s foot.

A quiet groan before Hannibal shakes his head. “She was fine. Not a scratch on her. Nothing happened at all until we went home again, and she just…” Hannibal frowns, swallows, shakes his head again, slower. “She couldn’t stop screaming. That house had been cleaned and things set into place but she couldn’t sleep in her room without waking and screaming, crying for them, for me. We lived in a hotel for a while but… she couldn’t sleep there either.”

A small laugh then, humorless but it’s enough to relax Hannibal’s shoulders. “We tried doctors, medicine. Induced sleep that ended worse than natural sleep for her. We tried therapy and it was enough to soothe her… she slept longer, though not every night. As she grew up they anticipated it would pass but it didn’t. It just grew less frequent.”

Hannibal shrugs, brings a hand to his mouth with a small smile. “She started trying to keep herself quiet so I wouldn’t wake up. We’d go weeks where I would study from home because she couldn’t rest, and couldn’t concentrate at school. And then her therapist suggested a service animal for her, and we spent a long time on the fence about it. If nothing else had helped, talking, therapies and meditations and hypnosis, how would a dog?” Brown eyes up to Will’s and he holds his gaze for a long time. “Miracles, apparently.”

And so softly, Will feels the pain within his chest begin to crack. It splits, down and down and down, and a warmth floods him that finally lets him breathe again. He ducks his head to turn away the small smile that appears. He understands, too well, the inexplicable terror that Mischa lives with - as if the world itself is collapsing, as if everything he’s ever known or loved has perished, because he wasn’t fast enough, smart enough, good enough to stop it - but for Hannibal, it is a different thing entirely.

At least Will and Mischa can feel their ghosts.

Hannibal has to try to fight them blind.

Will sets Hannibal’s feet aside, and twists his own up beside him, stretching to scoot into Hannibal’s seat with him. It is a tight fit, but warm, and he settles against Hannibal’s side with the other man’s arm across him, before Winston hops up where both their feet now rest and settles contentedly across them.

“Let me make it easier for you,” Will asks, with a sudden and acute clarity as to what he could bring to them both, how much he can offer. He rests his palm against Hannibal’s cheek and turns him gently for their eyes to meet. “Hannibal, you’ve - god, you’ve fought so fucking hard. For so long,” murmurs Will, shaking his head. “I don’t know how you’ve done it so long alone but - you don’t have to anymore. Not alone. Not if you don’t want to.”

Hannibal sighs, moving to rest his chin against Will’s hair, eyes closing as he holds him close. He feels older, they both do. But it has been a long time since he has felt this contented.

“I fear being a burden on you as you do being on me,” Hannibal tells Will softly, smiling against him before he pulls back to look at him again, before he ducks enough to kiss him, taste the peppermint on Will’s lips, still, from the coffee. “I think we should try.” He laughs, then, closes his eyes and lets out a slow breath before looking at Will again. “I think we should present the idea to Mischa, and then try.”

“With her blessing,” Will agrees, unable to fight down the slight smile that catches between their lips. Another kiss, and another, soft simple things that even so gentle curl Will’s socked toes pleasurably beneath the heavy dog that lays across his feet. “We can try,” he murmurs, “and I can keep the house in Wolf Trap, since it’s mine. For weekends or space or,” Will shrugs, “if it doesn’t work out.” The words aren’t weighted, a realistic consideration that Hannibal doesn’t argue but simply kisses away for now, instead.

Will twists, eyes closing as Hannibal lips drag against his cheek instead, his neck, and Will rests his head against Hannibal’s shoulder, bodies angled to face each other in the shared chair. “I want this,” he says. “I want to be here, I want - I want to be here for you both.”

Hannibal just smiles, contented, comfortable, and - despite everything - nervous, genuinely, delightfully nervous to have someone in his life this way, when he never has before. Not like this.

“I want you here,” he tells him, a hand up to stroke his hair before settling against Will’s side, letting his eyes close so they can just rest together for a while, Winston warming their feet, hearts beating slowly together. With a sigh, Hannibal allows another smile, coy, “and it will be welcome to have a place to escape to over the weekends, from the city. After work for us both. Occasionally during the day when neither feel that work is necessary…”

“Eyes on the prize,” Will laughs, and god, it feels good. He stays tucked close to Hannibal, kissing him, allowing himself to be kissed, reassurance in every fond touch shared between them. The sadness that had pressed itself against Will lingers distant like a days-old bruise, but it’s easy enough to ignore beneath the sudden excitement, the relief, that maybe all those times Will told himself that he wasn’t meant for a life like this, he simply needed to wait until he was.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

> *"This is Matthew Brown," he answers, and for a moment imagines how much fun this might have been if Will wasn't in the state he's in. Matt grudgingly discards the next dozen responses to Hannibal and forces his voice to lighten a little from the arch tone it had assumed. He sighs, "Will asked for you, but he can't really talk right now…"*
>
> Trigger warnings for panic attacks in this chapter, sorry guys!

A twist forward, a twist back. A shrug up, and then Will lowers his shoulder again.

"Fuck," he sighs, nursing it with stretched fingers as he sits on the arm of the couch. The game is on, though curiously muted, and Matthew regards Will only for as long as necessary, before setting aside his beer.

"Need a hand?"

"No."

"You know I'm a trained medical professional, right?"

"Yes."

"So let me take a look."

"Matt, it's fine," Will insists, but his attempt to sound stubborn falls flat, and Will sighs, grudging, when Matt scoots closer across the couch and replaces Will's fingers with his own.

Working his hand against the shoulder blade, higher to where he can feel Will's scar beneath his shirt, Matt presses steadily, seeking out a knot or trigger point, frowning as none make themselves apparent. To his credit, he doesn't step closer to Will than he needs to reach him comfortably, and Will is grateful for the space between them.

"What'd you do to it?"

"Nothing," Will says, and it's the truth rather than stubbornness. "It's not even - it's not a muscle thing," he protests, twisting away from the touch and relinquished readily when he does. Stretching his fingers, Will glares at them, as if by doing so he could force feeling back into the tips that have been numb for seemingly hours now. "It's the nerves."

"Undergoing a series of acupuncture treatments has been shown to restore sensation even to permanently damaged nerves," Hannibal responds, and Will blinks up from his hand to

regard the man now at his side. The TV is gone, replaced with a fireplace, the couch beneath him softer than his own. Hannibal's face seems to shift before him, as if Will can't quite focus directly on him. Younger, perhaps, hair a little longer and more loose than he wears it now.

"I thought I was staying in Wolf Trap tonight," murmurs Will, as the room - all finely appointed - seems to nearly shudder, as if viewed through water, around him. There are furs, here, or at least their patterns, piled high in the corner as if atop a mattress, and Will shakes his head. "Did Mischa -"

A scream pierces the air and when Will blinks again, there are marks upon the wall. Strange sigils, in blood dried to brown, but for the freshest of them that drips long and pools soaking into the expensive carpet.

"This is the house," Will breathes, on his feet but not fast enough to stop the door from banging open. The screaming is louder, longer, an agonized wail that seems more animal than human in its pain and Will looks up as the intruder's knife blinks bright in the flashlight beam.

"Hannibal!" shouts Will. But he doesn't move, Hannibal doesn't see the man who's come from the closet - the front door - in his blood-stained house - in Hannibal's beautiful home - and Will can't get his gun free, it's stuck and he tries to shout but the rest of the squad won't be able to hear him over the screaming. And Hannibal just sits, watches Will with wide, trusting eyes but when Will lunges to stop the knife from bearing down on him, it rockets pain down his body instead. Shots fire, Hannibal is gone, and the screaming, endless screaming -

"Will, Will! Shit -"

This voice isn't Hannibal's, it isn't the killer's, it isn't Will's own but it's familiar and it's all he has. The screaming's quieter, and when Will takes a breath his throat feels like it's bleeding. He twists, shaking in the cold air as clothes stick to his skin and the sheets and he feels like a fly in a web.

"Hey, woah, just… pull the air in, you gotta fill your lungs -"

But there is nothing, just tangles and sigils and blood and - fur… fur warm beneath his hand and Will grasps it, feels the dog's heart beat beneath his trembling fingers. No blood, no slick against Winston's strong body, nothing that suggests he's hurt… just that he's here, on the bed now and in Will's arms and Will makes a sound like a whimper, presses his hand against his face and grits his teeth.

"Good boy, Winston." Matt's voice is softer now, and Will's fairly sure he's closer, but he's not touching him and Will is slowly starting to find the rhythm of how breathing works again. "Come on Will, deep breaths."

Will curls his fingers in Winston's long fur and shakes against him.

“I can’t,” he manages, but it’s all the air that’s left in him and suddenly - like an elevator dropping, like a chair falling backwards - there’s no room for any more. Just frantic hitched breaths catching short against Winston’s side as Will turns, body wracked so tight he’s all but immobile, and numb fingers cast out for Winston’s muzzle and at least he feels the warm tongue against his hand, against his cheek next, his doggish whine piercing the waterfall rush of blood crashing against Will’s ears.

“You can,” Matt tells him, even as he curls his hands into fists to resist touching him. Knowing it’s unwanted, knowing it won’t help when Will is already fighting to breathe, smothered by the air around him. He crouches instead, sets a hand against Winston to reassure him, too. “You can breathe. You’re breathing right now. Your sides are moving and there’s air in your lungs, Will.”

Matt stands again, and casts about the room as if there’s something there that might be magically marked as What Will Needs. It is a medical condition and it isn’t - the panic attack, he can work Will through that, but the deeper fear, it’s out of his realm outside of taking Will EMT-style to a doctor. He can imagine the flurry of panic and curses it would earn him if he tried.

“Hannibal,” comes Will’s voice from where Winston licks him still, the only one of the three who’s calm now. “Please - I -”

It would be a lie to say that the words don’t hurt, but Matt has time enough later to prod his bruises from it, and he can’t leave Will to do it now, not when he’s so pale and so small, sweating and shaking. “Where’s your phone?” Matt asks, and finds it beside the bed as soon as he’s asked.

All Will can see is blood, his own - Hannibal’s - Mischa’s - their parents that Will can never meet, all looking to him for help that Will can’t offer. He forces his eyes open, but the room swims where tense, panicked tears fill his gaze, and for a moment the shadows on the wall look like dark dried markings, and Will turns his face against Winston’s side again.

Matt guesses the passcode on the second try, the first four-digits of the old apartment in New Orleans, and skims through to find Hannibal’s number. It rings once, for the hour, twice, for Hannibal waking to find it, and on the the third is answered.

“Yo,” Matt murmurs, looking to where Will lies still now, almost motionless but for the soft jerks of breath that move his sides.

There is a long pause before Hannibal responds. “This is Hannibal Lecter.”

Matt is surprised by how heavy his accent is, perhaps made worse by sleep, perhaps it’s always that way. It hardly matters thinking now, it’s not even that Matt particularly cares. He turns back to where Will is clinging to his dog, shirt stuck to him with cold sweat, body taut as every muscle tenses and shivers.

“This is Matthew Brown,” he answers, and for a moment imagines how much fun this might have been if Will wasn’t in the state he’s in. Matt grudgingly discards the next dozen

responses to Hannibal and forces his voice to lighten a little from the arch tone it had assumed. He sighs, “Will asked for you, but he can’t really talk right now…”

Another pause, perhaps consideration as to how Will could be asking when his phone is being used by another as a proxy. Then Hannibal clears his throat, shifts as though to sit up.

“I didn’t realize you were still staying with him,” Hannibal comments, but that, too, holds little rancor; he just sounds tired. “Is he unwell?”

“Little better now,” Matt admits, but he paces from the bedroom, near enough to duck back in if needed. Winston continues his steady consolation, and for a moment Matt wonders if he’s timing each warm wet pull of his tongue with Will’s breath, to calm it. “He had a panic attack. Woke up out of a dead sleep, I guess,” he tells Hannibal. “I didn’t know he was having them.” More than Matt means to say perhaps, but he rolls his eyes to the ceiling and continues. “He asked for you. Or about you. I don’t know. He said your name. Figured I’d call. Not really my jurisdiction anymore.”

The sound of fabric against fabric as Hannibal climbs from bed, the sound of a light flicking on. Entirely normal things that sound so frighteningly domestic over the line that Matt almost hangs up.

“The light might help him not see the shadows he’s so afraid of,” Hannibal comments at length, before the water runs somewhere near the receiver and shuts off again. “I’m in Baltimore, it will take me some time to get there, if he’s coherent please tell him I am on my way.”

A swallow, a long moment before a harsh breath is exhaled against the phone. “Thank you for calling me.”

Matt doesn’t know what to say to that. He hasn’t met the man, didn’t plan on doing so, and as it stands now still doesn’t want to, except that it might bring Will back to himself in a way that medical training can only help so much. So he hangs up without saying anything and tosses the phone to the couch, before returning to the bedroom and switching on the lights.

“You’re a good guy, Winston,” Matt tells the dog again, settling a hand on his head, fingers behind his ears. The other dogs are starting to return, but none come onto the bed and finally Matt sits beside Will. “Doctor’s on his way,” Matt murmurs, relieved when Will looks towards him, the color drained from him, lips parting numbly. Reaching to rub Will’s back - no intention in it but to soothe - Matt stops when Will curls a little tighter in on himself and pets Winston again instead.

Matt doesn’t know how long they wait, but he does know that after a while Will’s breathing soothes to be enough to keep him conscious, still shallow but slower. Some of the dogs return upstairs, to the room Matt has made his own in the time he’s stayed here, him and Will slowly growing used to holding schedules where neither come across the other in the kitchen. Buster lingers by Matt’s feet, Winston remains warm and close against Will, perhaps asleep, perhaps just dozing and keeping watch over Will where he rests.

It's one of the upstairs mutts that notices the car first, a brief 'wuf' to alert the others and Matt's upstairs quickly to lock them in the room so they don't get in the way. The car that pulls up is massively expensive, and Matt has to refrain from rolling his eyes, from letting his ingrained distaste for money turn his tone to a honed blade. The man who steps from it is younger than his voice made him appear to be, wrapped in a long coat, dark pants, boots.

Hannibal takes the porch steps in one and watches his breath steam before him as he regards Matt through the screen door. A moment of silence before he directs his eyes away and back again.

"Did he manage to sleep again?" he asks.

"Little while ago." Matt doesn't move to open the door yet, a sudden wild possessiveness overtaking him, though it shows no more than in a slight narrowing of eyes. Though this house isn't his, he's lived here for a few months enough to make it feel like his home. Though the dogs aren't his, he's known them far longer than Hannibal has, and they know him like family. Though Will isn't his -

He works his jaw, when the thought of letting Hannibal go back to where Will lays pale and terrified, vulnerable, starts to pull viciously at him. It isn't envy, nothing so shallow as just wanting, Matt tells himself, but it's a perfect storm of knee-jerk disdain for the man who stands fancy and well-dressed in front of him, and his desire to look out for Will, just like he always has.

And fine, he admits to himself, maybe a little envy.

"Steadied out his breathing," Matt adds. "But I don't know if it's done - if he'll wake up again like that."

Hannibal nods, a quick jerk of his head before he keeps it ducked, licks his lips and looks up again. He seems just as intent to avoid Matt's eyes as Matt is to avoid his.

"Usually after one they are alright for the rest of the night," he says, pushing his hands into his pockets from the cold. He does not ask Matt to let him in, the man will or he won't, and he had called him initially, Hannibal doubts he would have done so just to tell Hannibal to go back home. He catches a curious look as he lets his eyes skim the man again, and elaborates. "My sister, she suffers similar attacks, she has most of her life. The patterns of PTSD are similar in sufferers, though often manifest different horrors."

They're quiet for a moment more, and Hannibal rests his eyes on the window where Will keeps his table in the summer, moves it in the colder months. His bottom lip curls into his mouth but he does not bite it.

"I hope you have had luck finding work," he says at last. "EMTs have the turnover rate of emergency room doctors, but are always in demand." Brown eyes linger on Matt's a moment before Hannibal allows, "Will told me you were looking."

Matt, dressed still in a t-shirt and sweatpants from sleep, shivers a little at the cold that blows into the house, and only then steps back, a silent invitation for Hannibal to enter. "Trying," he

acknowledges, with a snort. “Hard to find a gig when you’ve only got training in one thing, and want to do anything but that.”

The screen door is shut quietly behind Hannibal, the weathered wooden door just as softly behind it, and Hannibal closes the locks each in turn. Matt’s attention is drawn to the bed where Will lies curled quiet, sleeping with shallow breaths against Winston, and he paces towards the kitchen rather than continuing to talk there. Allowing Hannibal his space for a moment, here, with Will, despite how much he wants to send the man packing.

Hannibal sets his coat down, folded on the couch, and takes quiet steps into the main room to look over Will. He seems to be in a shallow sleep, comfortable enough beside his dog to not wake at the sound of footsteps. For a long moment, he lingers, considers just climbing into bed with Will and soothing him back to himself, but something pulls him instead to go to the kitchen instead, following the man who had called him, let him in.

He’s taller than Will, but not by much, and deceptively thin - Hannibal can see the man takes pride in his body and in the effort it takes to get it looking as it does. He taps his fingers against the counter and waits for Matt to turn to him on his own, on his way around the kitchen to keep his hands busy making a sandwich.

“I knew he got the things, I’ve just never seen one,” Matt mutters, perhaps to himself, but Hannibal allows a small smile before it fades, eyes down to the counter his fingers splay on.

“It’s rare you would have been called out for one,” he says gently, voice quiet to not carry through to where Will sleeps. “I can tell you that you never get used to them.”

It would be so much easier if Hannibal were brusque towards Matt, dismissive or territorial or even just rude. Easier still if he wasn’t so fucking tall, so well-kept and handsome, so goddamn *European*. Easier if he wasn’t a doctor, even just in training, with an expensive car that betrays all the things he could offer to Will that Matt never could.

Never tried to, if he’s honest with himself, but it hardly matters now.

“Sorry about your sister,” Matt tells him, and he means at least that much. “How old?”

“Twelve.”

Matt whistles low, shaking his head. “Tough hand to get dealt at that age.”

“At any,” Hannibal agrees. “Thank you.” He lifts a hand to decline the sandwich offered to him, and Matt leans against the counter as Hannibal settles into a chair at the kitchen table, relentlessly elegant as he smooths a hand down his shirt and settles.

Matt studies him, a quick and practiced read of others after being dealt his own shit hand at too young an age. One that drove him out into the streets to make his own living, made him quick, made him smart, but not smart enough not to get caught, and throw him into the revolving door of Baltimore’s juvenile justice system. There’s no malice in Hannibal’s regard of him, though, and Matt swallows the bit of sandwich.

“You’ve been together a while now, huh?”

“Several months,” Hannibal replies, hands folded before him on the table. He doesn’t know how to react around Matt, doesn’t know how to be but cordially polite, but to allow that strange ache of gratitude that the man had called him, despite his history with Will, despite what Hannibal imagines would have been quite a wall to force himself over to dial the number he had.

“I met him getting a service dog for Mischa - my sister,” he explains, perhaps unnecessarily, but it earns a nod from the man before he continues his midnight meal, slow, thoughtful chewing before he leans back to pull a bottle of milk from the fridge and seek a glass to pour it into.

Hannibal watches him, turns his head to look into the well-lit room Will is still sleeping in, unmoving beyond the rise and fall of his breathing, beyond the occasional flicker of Winston’s tail where he rests, unmoving from Will’s tight embrace. Hannibal sighs, swallows, knows they could keep up the small talk as long as it took one of them to grow genuinely uncomfortable and leave, but he doesn’t want to subject Matthew to it, he doesn’t want to subject himself to it. He supposes in an obscure way he owes the man more than that.

“You could try for nursing,” he says at length, eyes on Matt as the other raises an eyebrow in question. “Instead of returning to EMT work. There are courses the hospital will fund, and with your work history the transition should not be a difficult one.” Hannibal shrugs one shoulder, almost dismissive. “It’s good work, and the hospital is always in need.”

Matt only offers a soft grunt of acknowledgment as he drinks down the glass in one long chug. He wipes it from his lips with his hand, splays his fingers across his pants to clean them, and then folds his arms, watching Hannibal. He’s never liked handouts, too few of them ever given in his life, and fewer than those that didn’t come with an expectation for repayment twice-over for the favor. But the information is valuable - all information is - and he files the suggestion away for later.

“You don’t want to talk about my work experience,” Matthew remarks, idly, and Hannibal lifts a brow.

“If I didn’t, then I would not.”

Matt has to hide a smirk behind his hand at this, turning to dust the crumbs off the counter and return the milk to the refrigerator. “He told you about us.”

“To a point.”

“So you know.”

“Well enough,” Hannibal answers.

This, at least, genuinely amuses Matt - surprised that Will found the nerve to tell him, and despite himself, pleased to hear that he did. Will’s never been deceptive, not intentionally, but prone to uncertainty and hesitation - and Matt usually, at least in their time together, provided

the firm hand that shoved him forward to make a choice. Just the same as this time - an all-too brief meeting of lips rather than a push, but with much the same effect.

And Will made his choice.

“I’m a lot of things,” Matt considers, “mostly unflattering. I’ve made decisions that maybe should have gone other ways, done things I could have been more careful about, but I’m not a monster. You should have seen how pissed he was when I thought there might still be something there.” He settles his arms around his middle again, reluctance quieting his voice as he admits, “You should see how he talks about you.”

It’s uncomfortable, suddenly, but the kind of discomfort that Matt knows too well - being unwelcome somewhere, being unwanted. An extra presence where he’s neither needed nor desired and it rattles like nervous energy in his pulse when he mutters, “I hope he’s not just something pretty for you to carry around in your nice car and your fancy house.” A pause, and Matthew adds, quietly, “I hope you know how fuckin’ lucky you are.”

For a long moment, Hannibal says nothing, too used to being seen for the things he owned, for his name, and not himself. He has long since stopped taking personal offence, but there is always something, just a little nail, that drives harsh against his heart at the implication. He watches Matt, watches the way he withdraws and resigns himself, and Hannibal almost feels guilty for feeling so grateful.

“I am very lucky,” he agrees, voice quiet, and for a brief moment, their eyes meet again and there is an understanding there, quiet, reluctant, but unmistakable. Hannibal looks away first.

Matt watches him, the acquiescence in the movement, and feels a pang of guilt that he quickly dismisses. Still, his voice quiets. “Good that you know it,” he tells Hannibal. “Better that you don’t forget it. He seems all shy and sweet sometimes, but he’d as soon put you on your ass as be treated unkindly.” With a slight smile, Matt ducks his head and pushes off the counter. “And if you don’t treat him right, someone else will.”

It isn’t a threat, not really. He’s been around long enough to know when his place in things is done, no matter how shitty it feels or how long he’ll feel like shit about it. But Matt knows Will, knew him back in New Orleans and got to know him again now, and knows that for all his flaws - though there aren’t nearly as many as Will thinks himself to have - he’s good, and he’s smart, and he’s kind.

And walking away to leave them be is one of the hardest fucking things Matthew Brown has ever done.

He sets his hand against Hannibal’s shoulder, just a pat, as he goes back up the stairs, clicking for the dogs to follow, Buster hot on his heels. “Watch it,” Matt warns the pup, before scooping up the wriggling little dog to carry him the rest of the way.

Hannibal sits a few moments more, listens as the door upstairs clicks shut, listens to the shuffling of many clawed feet above his head as the dogs settle. He thinks of the man who had gone with them, the man he had not intended to meet but would have been open to, the man who had been Will’s and who Will had allowed to call him his, for however long they

had been together in New Orleans. He allows a smile, a gratitude, before quietly standing from the table to go to the front door, to set his shoes beside it before padding quietly to the room where Will lies with Winston.

He greets the dog with a gentle pat to his head, lifts the blankets that had been loosely draped over Will's form to climb beneath them, fully dressed, and soothes Will's hair from his forehead with a gentle palm, over and over until he stirs, stiffens, and turns to look over his shoulder. Hannibal just smiles.

"Can't leave you alone even one night," he sighs, watching Will take him in, realize he's not in a fever dream or flashback.

"Fuck." Will turns, unseating Winston who curls up against his back instead, as Will flips to bury himself against Hannibal. Awake and half-asleep, addled from the attack still, Will touches Hannibal's face with careful fingers, to feel the curves of his face that he knows so well, to see his eyes, his mouth, trace his nose and his jaw, and sighing, shaking, when Hannibal turns against his hand to press a kiss.

"I had a - a dream," Will murmurs, before drawing tightly against Hannibal, leg slid between Hannibal's, head beneath his chin. "About you, and - and everything, and Mischa, and -" He swallows, roughly, uncertain how Hannibal came to be here but too grateful to care. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." A sigh, hands up in Will's hair to card through it, to scratch his scalp softly to feel Will arch and settle against him closer, arms around him as Hannibal slips his around him. "We're fine," he assures him. "Both of us, no trouble. Mischa and Maggie are sleeping soundly, and I am right here."

He thinks of how he had worried over them living together, how he had not been able to work out the logistics of it all, fearing that they would take up each other's space, would press too close too soon too much.

Now he holds Will and breathes him in, still tense, still nervous and exhausted, most of his night spent awake and in a cold sweat for fear of something no one else could see. He holds him and thinks how they will get through this, too, that they will find ways to cope with the attacks, as Hannibal had with Mischa, they would find a system.

Will settles slowly, body aching bruised from how rigid he went in the attack, how every muscle had snapped to attention - fight, not flight - to fend off an attacker that he only imagined. His own monster from many years ago, coming not only for he and Winston now, but for Hannibal - for Mischa. He swallows hard and parts his lips against the hollow of Hannibal's throat, not to kiss but simply to feel his own breath against the man's skin, to know that it comes steady now.

"Thank you for coming," Will murmurs. "I don't remember calling, I - I'm sorry, I woke you -"

Hannibal breathes, slowly in and out himself to feel Will mirror the motions, to feel his hands relax around him before Will slides them forward to press against Hannibal's chest between

them, curled and warm, as Hannibal holds him close. He turns, just enough, so he is on his back and Will against him, pulling the blanket up snug over them both as he strokes Will's back, over his hair, turns to draw knuckles down his cheek.

"I'll always come," he promises, though he suspects Will is already asleep. "I'll always be here."

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

“Did you lose your job?”

“No, I did not lose my job,” Hannibal laughs, exasperated.

“Crash the car?”

“I am an excellent driver.”

“Are you selling the house?”

Hannibal hums, narrows his eyes at his sister in turn and sets the bowl aside for the moment, dusting his hands off on a towel. “I’m not selling *it,” he ventures.*

Chapter Notes

A long-awaited conclusion...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What happened?”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow and turns to watch Mischa as he continues to stir something with a wooden spoon in a large bowl balanced against his hip. Mischa narrows her eyes.

“You’re baking.”

“You like my baking.”

“The last time you baked this much you told me we couldn’t have a pet that Christmas.”

“And this Christmas you had twelve dogs spend almost a week,” Hannibal points out, amused, adjusting his grip. “See how life comes around in the end.”

“Did you lose your job?”

“No, I did not lose my job,” Hannibal laughs, exasperated.

“Crash the car?”

“I am an excellent driver.”

“Are you selling the house?”

Hannibal hums, narrows his eyes at his sister in turn and sets the bowl aside for the moment, dusting his hands off on a towel.

“I’m not *selling* it,” he ventures.

“You’re not redecorating again?” Mischa pleads, but she laughs when Hannibal’s jaw twitches a little at the jibe. She scoots up onto a stool and folds her arms across the counter, chin against them, watching as Hannibal stirs. “So what are you doing to it?”

“We’re expanding,” he ventures. “Or might be.”

“Hannibal,” Mischa sighs, “there’s already too many rooms for us as it is.”

“Not the house. We, as in us,” he finally says, watching her now as the stirring slows to a stop. “‘With Mischa’s blessing’, as he said.”

A pause, a blink, before Mischa sits up again, watching as Hannibal dips the tip of his finger into the mix and tastes it, setting it to the counter and washing his hands, deliberately with his back to her as she stares a hole between his shoulders.

“Will’s gonna move in,” she confirms, Hannibal flicking water into the sink before drying his hands properly.

“If you allow it.”

“With his dogs? All of his dogs?”

“Well, where else would they live?” Hannibal asks, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes even as he keeps his expression impassive. He watches Mischa grin, suppress it, smile again, trying to hold her composure. He knows, that despite the promise of dogs, she would enjoy Will’s company. They get along well, when they just talk together, and it is one of the things that Hannibal values in the man more than he can say.

She bites her lip, grinning wide, and leaning so far over the counter that she’s nearly off the chair, supported on her arms and chest. “I feel like now is when I should bargain for something,” she muses.

“Oh? Such as?”

“All the dogs get to sleep in my room,” she answers, eyes narrowing as if in challenge, before she ducks her head against her arms and laughs. “You two are so gross and awesome.”

“A vote of confidence, then,” Hannibal responds, watching her with such warmth that it nearly aches. How accepting she is, so readily, of such a change to both their lives - how she’s accepted Will perhaps even faster than Hannibal did, without question, without anything more than a whole-hearted trust. “He would be a great help to have around, when

I'm unable to get you from school, perhaps. When dinner needs to be started. Although his cooking skills leave ought to be desired -"

"He's not a nanny," Mischa teases, but there's something earnest in her words, too, a gentle worry that she can't hide, despite how much she tries. "Besides, I like when you pick me up from school."

Hannibal smiles, an understanding there that doesn't need to be spoken before he moves to the counter as well and crosses his arms over it, bending to have their eyes on the same level.

"Liar," he teases, watches her nose wrinkle in a grin.

"Truther."

"Fine. School will remain my jurisdiction. In return you will walk the dogs with Will and leave me my space to read in peace in the evenings."

Mischa grins wider, and Hannibal finds himself smiling more as well, before straightening and leaning to kiss the top of her head before turning back to his work. "As to where the dogs sleep, from what the six days over Christmas have taught me, I am inclined to say they will choose where they sleep, when, and how long for."

The words have no sooner left his mouth than Mischa's eyes narrow and her smile widens, scheming already how best to ensure they all just *happen* to choose her room.

"Where is it?"

"Near the hospital. Walking distance, really."

"You sure you want to be that close?"

"You sure you want me to keep looking?"

Will can't help but smile a little at the rejoinder, tucking his hands into the pocket of his hooded sweatshirt, and shifting from one foot to the other to stave off the cold. The snow has melted from Christmas, at least, and there are days that feel downright like spring, but it's still chilly this early in the morning.

Matt seems unbothered by it, dressed in no more than a t-shirt as he drags his suitcase out to hurl it into the back of his truck. There he settles, back against it and arms crossed, smirking, and knowing that Will is going to follow.

He does, of course, shuffling over slowly in his slippers as the dogs bound in and out of the house behind him. "Job seems okay?" Will asks.

"Okay," Matt agrees. "They're gonna cover a lot of my fees - books and labs and shit - while I work. Modern day indentured servitude."

“That’s the spirit.” Will turns his eyes to Matthew, and relieved to see no tension in his jaw, but just a warm, if small, smile. “Nurse Brown, huh?”

“I take it back. Fuck school, I’m staying here.”

“Fuck no, you’re getting educated.”

“You remember when I educated you?”

“I remember a lot of shit we did,” Will replies, grins, finds a returning smile directed at him before Matt ducks his head to see Buster scratching at his leg to be picked up, a little barrel of a dog compared to how little he had been when Will had first brought him home, when Matt had first seen him, holding him in the palm of his hand and stroking down his back with the pad of his thumb until the little pup fell asleep.

Will watches him lick across skin he still knows so well, watches Matt laugh and hold him up before him to watch his feet dangle and his tail flicker back and forth in doggish joy. He remembers the last time Matt had gone, just before Will had moved here. He remembers how Buster had waited by the door for him to come back in again.

“You better make enough for pet food,” Will says suddenly, biting his lip as the words settle against himself as well as Matt, the weight of them, their meaning.

“Shut up,” snorts Matt, burying his face against Buster as the dog squirms and thrashes happily.

“You shut up,” answers Will, shrugging. “He missed you. And the last time I saw him so friendly was the last time you were with him. He’s become kind of a piss in the meantime.” The words are only gently chiding, spoken fondly towards the little dog as Will steps nearer and scratches him, earning a happy yelp.

“Like fuck you’re giving up one of your dogs.”

“It’s not like he’s the only one. Plus,” Will remarks, “Buster’s always been more yours anyway. And he’s little. Good size for an apartment.”

Matt watches Will, for a long time. Disbelief shifts to something much softer, a feeling Matt can’t put to words and has even less hope of putting to thanks. “I don’t have a leash, or food, or -”

“In your bag,” Will tells him, and Matt smirks. He tugs Will close, one arm around his shoulder, Buster squashed contentedly between them, and rests his cheek against Will’s forehead.

“Thanks, Graham.”

Will doesn’t say anything in return, hugs Matt the same way and feels Buster squirm between them to settle. He’ll miss him when the evening falls and only six dogs run into the house, he’ll miss him when Buster isn’t the first to bark up a storm when someone drives down to

the house, even if it's someone he knows. He will miss him. But Will can think of no better person for him to belong to, than Matt.

"He'll hate it."

"I can live with that."

The camera shakes a little but Mischa steadies it enough so that the picture is clear. A gift, early birthday, deliberately requested so she could catalog the life and times of the new household. Perhaps a new hobby, even, in video editing and taking, but to Hannibal it matters little, as long as she's happy doing it and harming no one in the process.

Hannibal obligingly opens the front door for her and she steps through to show a quickly zoomed and refocused shot of Will releasing all the dogs from the back of the work van, the creatures streaming across the front lawn and into the house around her as she laughs and turns the camera to follow them. Then it's back up on Will.

"Moving in day," she announces, almost sombre in tone, like a documentary director on BBC Discovery. "How do you feel?"

Will blinks, between Mischa and the camera, back to Mischa again, and then to Hannibal. "Is she - are you filming me?" he asks with a laugh, suddenly scarlet as he looks towards the camera.

"The new creature seems startled by his surroundings, having perhaps never seen a camera before," Mischa intones.

"I'm - I feel," Will begins, pushing his hair back from his face to look towards the street. He spends a moment that way, indeed taking in his new environment - his new home - and finally turns back towards her. "I feel great."

"You didn't bring much stuff."

"It's coming," answers Will, half-warning, before he steps past her and the camera follows him, zooming in as he works off his shoes. "A lot of it's staying in Wolf Trap."

"And why is that?"

"You know 'why is that'," Hannibal tells her, and she laughs brightly.

"Because I'll still need to go out there sometimes," Will responds. He gives Winston a vigorous scratch before sending him into the house. "And we'll be out there on weekends."

The camera spins, auto-focusing in and out on Mischa's face as she whispers, conspiratorial, "Will is going to teach me how to fish. And Hannibal."

A hum of dissent from her brother, off-screen, and the camera turns once more past the few bags that Will has brought in with him and the sea of dogs swarming happily through the

house, to settle just in time to catch Hannibal and Will leaning together, lips brushing in a long, soft kiss.

“Gross,” she snorts, giggling as the scene suddenly changes.

The garden has all but exploded from its confines. Greenery and flowers, some already courted by bees that duck and settle into them, trellises erected and overgrown with vines that will provide tomatoes and cucumbers, with bright shoots of spring onions beneath. The camera turns from the window to Will.

He motions to stay quiet, lifting his finger to his lips, before turning back to the hissing pan on the stove in front of him. Dressed in too-large sleep pants and ragged slippers, a threadbare t-shirt hanging from his shoulders, he can’t help but grin despite the happy sleepiness still hooding his eyes.

“Why are you cooking?” Mischa asks, though from her tone she knows already, and from Will’s ease, he knows all too well the routine with the camera.

“Because it’s Hannibal’s birthday, and we’re going to surprise him with breakfast in bed.”

“You know he can probably smell it already,” she warns him, and Will glances vaguely towards the bedroom, considering.

“Probably, but I haven’t burned the eggs, so that at least will be a surprise.”

The camera swings around, with a little more grace, now, than the first time, to present Mischa again, looking somewhat stern, though perhaps more her version of serious news reporter.

“The Will has grown used to his new environment, no longer shy of the camera, and attempting to understand and emulate the customs of the household - hey!” Mischa blinks, frowns, but there’s a hint of a grin before the camera finds Will again and he casually flicks water against it too, blurring the screen somewhat but doing no damage to the device itself.

Will continues to cook, far more comfortable in the large kitchen, now, than he had been before, finding things on the first try instead of scrabbling through all the drawers. He takes out some herbs, seasons the eggs, and checks another pan to make sure nothing’s burned. The camera blurs fully for a moment as Mischa wipes it down with her sleeve, her face appearing in the auto focus as she grins, and directs the camera slowly behind her to where Hannibal is standing with his arms crossed watching Will make him breakfast. He notes the camera, sends a smirk, and quietly makes his way to the bedroom again.

There’s a shuffle, the sound of plastic on plastic, and the camera shows an interior of a hospital.

Will looks past the camera with narrowed eyes, before looking straight into it, and away again. His hair is longer, the bags under his eyes far smaller than what they were in the last video. He looks different, older. Slowly the camera turns, past Will, past, several nurses at their station, past white walls towards two people talking in the middle of the quiet corridor,

both in hospital issue uniform, neither willing to raise their voices. Will zooms, the camera picks them up slowly anyway.

“I’m merely saying your bedside manner could use some work,” Hannibal’s voice murmurs, a tone of genuine amusement there.

“And I’m saying there’s only so much bedside manner you can offer before it isn’t going to take, and you’ve just gotta get in, be polite, do your job, and go,” responds Matt, brows lifted as he folds his arms across the nurse’s scrubs he wears.

“Will,” Mischa whispers, laughing from one side of the camera, unseen, “let me have it back.”

“One second,” he answers, stifling his own delight. “This is too good.”

“A lesson not taught in most nursing curriculum,” ventures Hannibal, and Matt snorts.

“No, one I picked up actually working. You try cleaning bedpans all day and tell me how chipper you are by the end of it.”

“You seem to have flourished in that environment,” Hannibal suggests mildly.

Matt hides a grin behind his hand, forcing a stern expression. “Asshole.”

“Miscreant.”

An amicable exchange, shown in the amused narrowing of their eyes despite their words, and Will huffs a laugh before he can help himself. It’s Matt that catches him with a glance down the hallway, turning to Hannibal with a nod towards where Mischa and Will sit laughing, and the camera blinks to a still shot, along the worn wooden floor where dogs’ feet click by.

An adjustment is made, a book shoved beneath the camera to prop it upwards and focus it where Bev and Mischa sit cross-legged on the floor. A fan whirrs loudly in the background and both are dressed in tank tops and shorts, hair pulled up into nearly matching, messy ponytails from the heat.

“Today we’re going to watch Mischa Lecter finally - thoroughly - beat Beverly Katz in poker,” Mischa announces. She too, is older now, long-limbed and lanky like her brother. Her features are a little sharper, less soft and childlike than when the footage began. Still a teenager, though on her way to adulthood, just far enough along that it gives her a particular air of confidence and a tilt to her chin that reads as distinctly Lecter.

“Spoiler - there’s a twist ending,” Beverly responds, lips quirked into a wry smile as she spans a hand across her cards.

Mischa blows a raspberry and holds her hands out for the pack. “You keep lying to yourself,” she says, taking the cards and shuffling, quick flicks of her hands as she works the cards into a bridge, into its reverse, turns them over and over in one hand as Bev watches with narrowed eyes, keeping track of Mischa’s skill. When Mischa finally deals, Bev whoops and claps her hands.

“Atta girl.”

“Learned from the best.”

“Damn straight.”

“Learned to win from the best, too.”

“Why don’t you put your money where your mouth is, kid.”

A grin, as Mischa takes up her cards, and they begin to play, bets set down as Skittles in a bowl between them, tossed from smaller ones at their sides, though most of the ‘chips’ end up eaten.

“Call.” A handful makes it into the bowl and Bev catches a dog - a tubby little chihuahua, a new addition it seems - by the collar and yanks her back expertly from the pool of winnings. “Sit.”

“She knows where she’s going.”

“She may be your dog but she ain’t playing,” Bev grins, eyes narrowed, before they finally show their cards, and Bev laughs, head back and hands clapped together as Mischa frowns, and with a very serious expression presents her cards to the camera to show three of a kind, in aces.

“Damn, kid.”

“Damn straight.”

“Vegas next year.”

“No.” This from the kitchen, voices mingling together effortlessly, years of practice in perfecting their exasperation. Mischa just grins, leans close enough for Bev and the camera to hear.

“Atlantic City,” she suggests instead, to Bev’s delighted grin, before Mischa takes up the bowl of her winnings and trots to the kitchen, tubby dog following behind as Bev takes up the cards to shuffle again.

“I’ll be sixteen, I can go!” Her voice carries from the kitchen.

“Not on your life.”

“I’ll play you for it.”

“Who do you think taught Bev?”

The named party laughs, reaches for the camera and for a moment it clicks to black, before Bev’s face appears again, smirk evident and the camera turns, blurs as it goes into her bag and is adjusted to look out through the top of it where she tosses it in a semblance of

uncaring to her desk, where it shows Will in his own desk, legs crossed in his chair and hair coiling just above his ears. He has stubble coming in, just a shadow of it. He looks up when Bev calls his name.

"Soooooo, what's the plan for the weekend?" Bev drawls, watching Will's eyes narrow in suspicion before he clears his expression to a semblance of innocence. "Coming on to four years now, you guys gonna do something fun?"

"Why?"

"What why? Why does there have to be a why? I'm just asking."

"You're never just asking," Will reminds her, and she doesn't argue the point, leaning back against his desk. The camera is at his back, until he turns to face her, beside him, and shrugs. "I mean, Wolf Trap probably."

"Like every weekend."

"Like every weekend," Will agrees, with another flicker of suspicion. He's too quick for it to last long, taking in her grin with an arched brow. "What?"

"What, what?" She asks, and Will just narrows his eyes again. Bev snorts a laugh. "Did you get him anything?"

Will makes a sound that could be classed as desperation, but perhaps more closely fits with resignation.

"For me to know, and my partner to find out," he says, much to Bev's amusement.

"You got him a toy? Seriously?"

Will looks almost anguished as his cheeks flush and he runs a hand through his hair. "No, God, I just… no. I did not get him a sex toy, Bev, fuck." He ducks his head into his arms and spreads himself on the table like a cat would, mumbling something that sounds suspiciously like 'we have enough already'.

"Well you got him something, right?"

"Course I got him something, we've been together four years," Will mumbles, and there's just a hint of a smile that the camera can catch before he turns his head away. Bev allows a moment of peace before resettling, crossing her arms on the table as Will is, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

"Did you get him a car?"

Will laughs. "No."

"Another dog?"

"Hell no."

“A watch?”

“He’s got a watch.”

“Then what the heck can that little bag from the jewellers be about?” Bev murmurs, smiling wide when Will’s cheeks burn. “I know for a fact it ain’t for me.”

A moment of quiet before Will snorts softly and ducks his head, shoulders shaking as he laughs before looking up at her again. “I’m scared out of my mind,” he admits, and Bev stands up to drape over him in the closest semblance of a hug she can manage. “I might actually be insane.”

“Completely,” she agrees. “Four years together, most of that living together, practically raising a kid and definitely raising a whole pack of dogs. Totally nuts.”

Will groans a little, tilting his head in his arms enough to lift his eyes to her. “What if he says no?”

“Now you are *are* acting insane.”

“He could,” Will suggests, but it falls flat and he sits back in his chair, rubbing clammy palms against his pant legs. “What do I even say?”

“How about, ‘You’ve put up with me this long, why not the rest of your life’?”

“How about, ‘Want to share a tax break forever with me’?”

“You’re such a romantic, Graham,” Bev grins, punching him lightly in the arm. “You’ll stutter something out and blush dark as the no doubt expensive cabernet he’ll have you drinking and he’ll think you’re adorable and then -” She stops, suddenly, eyes wide. “Will.”

His own eyes grow large in response, but before he can ask, she exclaims, “Bachelor party!”

And the screen goes black.

”You know he loves you right?” Mischa’s voice remains suspended in the dark for a moment, before the camera clicks with motion and a blurry outline of her shoes before the focus kicks in. Black and white Chuck Taylors, rainbow laces with one end plaited to keep it from fraying more as she kicks softly against the stool she sits on.

“I do hope he does.”

“You’re an idiot, you know he does.” A hum from Hannibal as she sets the toes of her shoes together, turning them one way and another, over and over, puppetry entertainment as a backdrop to their discussion. A dog makes its way into the shot, nose curious against her shoes, before it meanders off, and Mischa adjusts the camera against her hip. "He’s loved you since day one.”

“Where are you going with this," Hannibal asks, and there is an underlying nervousness in his tone, not anger or displeasure, but something akin to trepidation. Mischa makes a sound

that is amusingly a mix of something Hannibal and Will would make and the camera shifts as she shrugs.

“Just following the natural progression of things,” she suggests. "You guys meet, you fall in love, you move in together…”

Hannibal doesn’t reply, continues to shift things around in the kitchen as Mischa stealthily rests the camera just over the edge of the counter, letting it focus on him as he moves around Will’s kitchen in Wolf Trap, the other nowhere in sight - nor heard - in the house. He notices the camera in passing, of course, a glimpse of a wry smile sent towards the lense before he continues the ruse of naïveté.

"Plus," Mischa adds, "neither of you are getting any younger."

"We're hardly decrepit."

"You're almost thirty," she responds, a grin in her voice when Hannibal turns a dry look towards her. "Have you even thought about it?"

"Thought about what," he teases, finally stopping his ceaseless movements around the kitchen to place his hands on the counter and regard her. A few grey streaks starting bright in his hair, and lines on his face that were not there before, but linger in the corners of his eyes, as if he's been smiling for a very long time.

"What comes next."

"Marriage."

"Yes," Mischa sighs explosively.

"Perhaps," he answers, smile playing just against his eyes.

"You have. You have, haven't you?"

"I have."

"And you're going to."

"I've taken it into consideration."

There's a long pause, and Mischa chokes out a laugh. "You already have the ring, don't you?"

There is a brief movement of Hannibal's lips, a gentle press, a twist of them, before they press lightly together and part on a smile and Hannibal turns away, back to his work. The camera lingers on him a few seconds more before it turns up to Mischa, upside down, who mouths "gross!", her smile so wide, lighting up her entire face, before the video cuts out.

This feed looks almost analog, slightly worse quality, perhaps, a new gadget of Mischa’s, the picture not entirely focused but still enough to suggest the camera is resting on something. A bookcase perhaps. On the feed, Hannibal is reading, glasses partway down his nose as he

reclines on the couch, one foot up against the cushion to rest his book on, the other out-stretched, settled on an ottoman. There is no sound as Hannibal turns his head, turns back, and dogs flood into the room, some only tall enough to see their tails, others actually making an appearance.

Hannibal seeks out a hand, without even lifting his eyes from the book, to stroke over Maggie's head as she comes by, over Winston's as he follows. Older, now, both dogs, but neither slowed in their enjoyment of life. A smaller thing, scruffy-looking and entirely a mutt, jumps up on the couch in doggish joy and delights in crawling into Hannibal's lap, which he graciously allows.

A moment, perhaps two, before Will appears in frame, coiling several leashes over his arm into loops, over-under, before setting them to the floor and approaching from behind Hannibal on quiet feet. He swallows, ducks his head, shaking it, tilting it up with a grin, a bite to his lip, before moving close enough to wrap an arm around Hannibal's collarbone and lean in to kiss his hair. The other smiles, brings a hand up to slip his glasses off and lower his book, as the little dog wriggles to resettle in his lap and Hannibal tilts his head back with a smile to just press against Will, as their mouths move in greeting, conversation no one else is privy to.

Will lifts his head again, straightens with a slow breath sighed through pursed lips, a nervous gesture that Hannibal does not see behind him. Will's fingers stretch, tighten, stretch again, and he circles around to drop onto the couch beside. Both legs draw up and fold beneath him, and Hannibal - brows knit - sets his book on the ottoman, glasses atop it. There is a look of concern, a question, but Will shakes his head and looks towards him, hopeful anticipation in the raise of his brows. They talk for a moment more, Will stammering and scratching a hand through his hair as Hannibal sits very still and listens.

Finally, blushing fiercely enough that the camera can pick up the darkening of his cheeks, Will digs a hand into the pocket of his pants, exhaling an enormous sigh that seems to collapse his shoulders in on himself. He tugs his hand free, something held inside of it, and biting his lip, offers a ring on open palm to Hannibal.

A pause, a moment where neither move, before Hannibal grins wide and presses a hand to his face. Will looks almost shocked, expression open and vulnerable, before Hannibal gestures, takes the little dog from his lap - much to her displeasure - and leans over the side of the couch to reach his bag, digging through it before sitting up again, for the moment eyes down to what his hand holds out of sight of the camera before he rests his elbow on the arm of the couch.

In his hand is a box, little, and with a look of barely veiled amusement, Hannibal turns back to Will, who looks pale now, and rests his elbow on the arm of the couch, cheek against folded fingers, and with his free hand opens the box back on tiny hinges to reveal a ring within it. Hannibal's eyes narrow in delight as Will's jaw goes slack before he just laughs. His own smile widens, and he moves to sit and face Will properly, mouthing something that makes Will shake his head and press a hand to his face. Hannibal takes the little ring from its box and offers it to Will as Will had offered his, readily going into the kiss Will initiates with his hand against Hannibal's cheek.

Though the camera doesn’t catch the sound, they both laugh, foreheads pressed together, the visible joy bringing them both unsteady, again and again, into soft, sweet kisses until finally one snares deeper. When their mouths finally close together, another sigh shared between them, each grinning bright, they speak softly to each other. Eyes closed, heads together, hands against the other’s face, as if in that moment, there was none but the other.

Hannibal says something that makes Will laugh again, shoulders lifting as he snorts, and he nods eagerly, tongue held between his lips as he takes Hannibal’s hand in his own and slides the gold band onto it. He’s held for a moment, quietly awestruck as he keeps Hannibal’s hand in both of his own, running his thumb across the ring, across the back of Hannibal’s hand, until drawing it to his lips for a kiss.

Taking Will’s hand in turn, squeezing his fingers warmly, Hannibal is just as gentle - just as certain and uncertain all at once - as he slips it onto Will’s finger. He starts to ask a question, eyes uplifted to Will, but it’s cut short when Will leans into him to kiss his answer in return.

The scene cuts, and there’s a sound of a camera clicking off, going to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

...but we can't leave you without a tidbit more: [x]

Thank you to EVERYONE for your unending support, for your feedback, for your anger towards Matt and nervousness over Will and Hannibal, for your concern for Mischa and for rooting for Bev. Thank you, all, so much, for caring about our characters as we do, and for loving this story enough to move it from four chapters to twenty.

- whiskey and blood

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